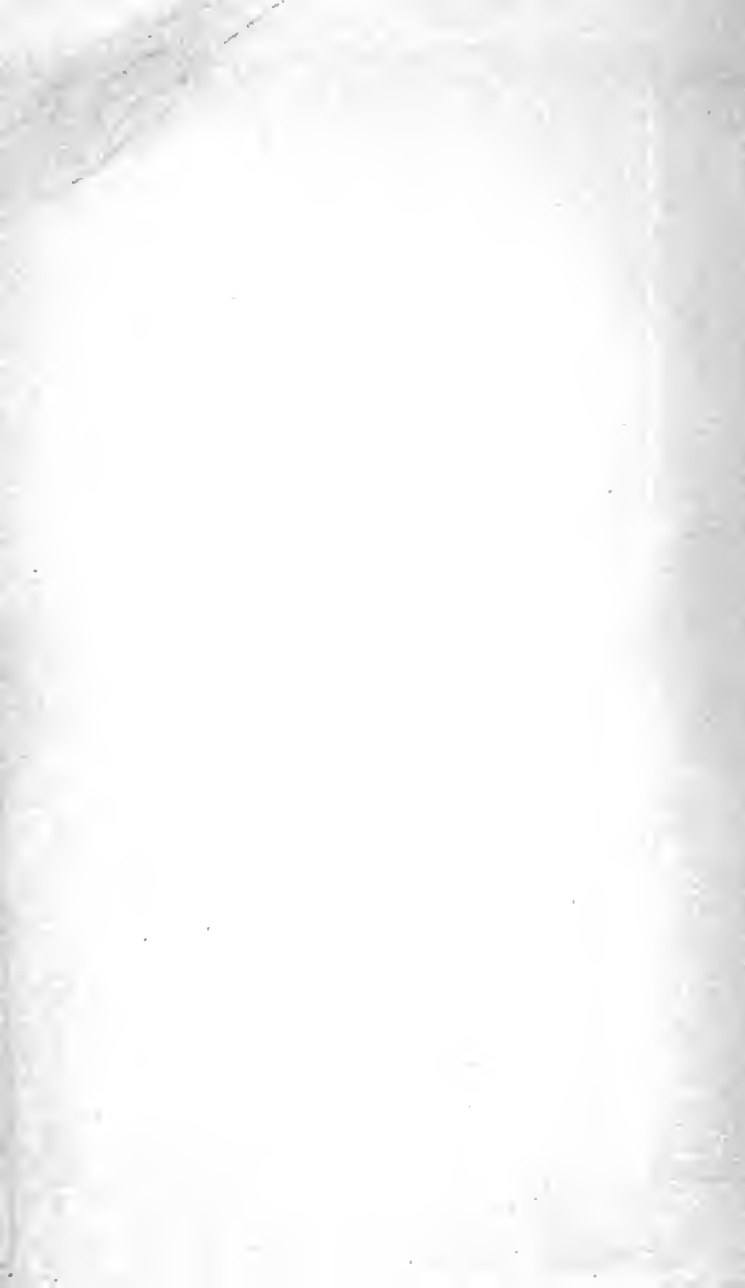


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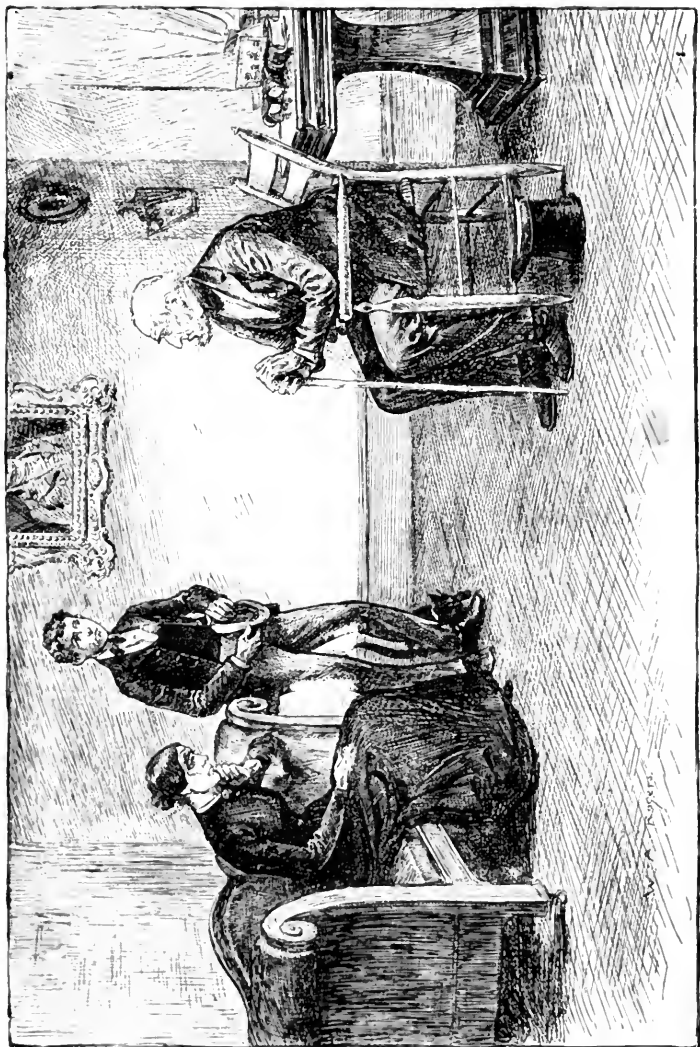
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HIS ONE FAULT

BY

J. T. TROWBRIDGE

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BOSTON

LEE AND SHEPARD PUBLISHERS

10 MILK STREET NEXT "THE OLD SOUTH MEETING HOUSE"

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HIS ONE FAULT.

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HIS ONE FAULT.

CHAPTER I.

KIT IS INTRODUCED.

“**L**ET the boy come and live with me, and I will be a father to him,” said Uncle Gray.

He was a hook-nosed, wiry man, with weather-beaten cheeks, and a voice cracked by asthma, and made still more harsh by driving slow oxen all his life. The cheeks twitched a little, however, and there was an unwonted softness in his tones, as he leaned back in his chair and addressed these words to the weeping woman on the sofa.

The weeping woman was his wife’s brother’s wife, or rather widow; for it was now nine days since Christopher Downimede, the village tinsmith, had scratched his thumb with a ragged-edged piece of metal, and three days since he had been carried to his grave, a victim of that mysterious and terrible disease, lockjaw.

The boy alluded to was Christopher the younger, better known in the village as Kit; now sixteen

years old, and capable, it was thought, of beginning to earn his own living.

This it seemed quite necessary that he should do ; for the late Mr. Downimede, although a thrifty mechanic, had spent his earnings in the support of his family, and left but little property, except some stock in trade and the house they lived in.

"He can come and live with me," said Uncle Gray, "and be a farmer ; I shall be glad enough to have somebody to shift the care and burden onter in a few years. You can keep the younger childr'n in school, let a part of your house, and take in a little sewin', and, I guess, git along. Here, Christopher ! Christopher !"

Hearing his uncle call, Kit, who was outside, came into the house. He was a rather bashful boy, with plump, red cheeks, which showed a distressing tendency to blush on occasions of the least embarrassment, but which had been looking unusually colorless since the shocking calamity that had bereft him of the kindest of fathers. He was a little scared at sight of his mother in tears, and of his uncle's solemn visage, but advanced manfully to hear the result of the consultation.

"I ben thinkin' o' your case, Christopher," said Uncle Gray, "and talkin' to your ma about you. What's your idee o' gitt'n' a livin' ?"

Poor Kit had to confess that he hadn't any ideas on the subject.

"You haint any gre't hankerin' after an edecation, have ye?" said Uncle Gray.

"I don't know that I care to go to college," Kit replied. "Though if pa had lived," — he choked a little, — "I suppose I should have kept on going to school two or three years longer."

"To be sure; if he had lived." Uncle Gray coughed to clear his throat. "But as 't is, it's time for you to be considerin' what you're a-gun ter make of yourself. Ye don't fancy his trade pa'tic'larly, do ye?"

"I don't fancy it at all," said Kit. "I won't be a tinner."

"So I thought. And I don't blame ye. Wal, now," continued Uncle Gray, "how would ye like the farm?"

"The farm?" said Kit. "What farm?"

"Wal, f'r instance, *my* farm. I've got a good place for ye there, if you'd like to come. We've no boys of our own, since Andy died," — the harsh-toned voice softened again, — "and me and your Aunt Gray have ben thinkin' 't would be jest the thing fer you to come and live with us, and be like our own son, and graj'ally slip yer neck into the

yoke as mine slips out. How do you think you would like it?"

Kit had pleasant recollections of the farm, from having visited it often in sugar-making time and huckleberry time, and enjoyed the hospitalities of Uncle and Aunt Gray.

"I think I should like it," he said, "only" — he caught his breath — "I don't want to leave ma — just now."

"That's right, that's right," said Uncle Gray, approvingly. "Glad to hear ye say that. But ye can't live tied to her apron-strings all your life. It's in the natur' of things that childr'n, 'specially boys, should strike out and do for themselves. Though yer livin' with me'll be a'most like bein' to hum; you can come and see your ma, and your ma can come and see you, often enough. Think on't, will ye! and le' me know to-morrow, when I'll be round agin."

Think of it Kit did, with many a pang of grief at the recollection of his father, who had been so much more to him than he had ever dreamed until he came to need his love and counsel.

"If he was only here to tell me what I had better do!" he said to his mother, as they talked the matter over that night, in the sad loneliness of their

little home. "I can't make it seem that he never will be here any more. But I know I shall have to depend upon myself now."

"Yes, my son," said the widow, in a stifled voice. "There never was a more upright nor a more generous man in his family, than your father, while he lived. But the prop of the house has been taken away. Heaven knows I would gladly keep you with me, and do for you as he would have done, if it was in my power."

The mother and son sobbed softly together in the gloomy silence. Then Kit said:—

"There's no use wishing things could be different. I know I have got my living to work for, and I may as well do it on Uncle Gray's farm as anywhere."

"Uncle and Aunt Gray have always been kind to you," suggested the widow.

"Yes, in their fashion," said Kit. "They're good-hearted folks. But a dollar looks pretty big to them."

"They're getting old, and will soon have a good many dollars to leave to somebody," the mother again suggested. She was not mercenary, and yet she thought it best to speak plainly of the prospect before Christopher, in case he should accept Uncle Gray's proposal. "It's a small farm, but a good one, and they have money at interest."

"I believe the boy Uncle Gray is *a father to*," replied Kit, after a little reflection, "will have to earn every dollar he gets of them. They work hard themselves ; and they don't believe much in anybody's sitting around on the clover-banks, watching the bees and butterflies. Even when I've been visiting them they have made me earn my board by doing lots of little chores. But I never much cared ; I like the farm, and I've had good times out there. Maybe I'd better go ; for I don't know what else I can do. I shall be near you, and if I do well I can help you. Perhaps I can make a home for us all some day."

When Uncle Gray called the next morning, he was "re'jiced," as he said, to hear that Kit had come to so sensible a conclusion. The widow was anxious to know just what he proposed to do for her boy, in the way of being "a father to him" ; but the worthy farmer was not prepared to meet that point.

"Wait till we see how he takes holt," he said. "If he does well by me, I'll do well by him ; you may count on that. The only way will be for him to come and try it a few months ; then we can settle the matter more definitely. We'll see how useful he makes himself."

The widow gave her boy much good advice when the time for parting with him arrived.

"You're a smart boy, Christopher, and you're a well-meaning boy. You're no shirk; and you're strong and active. But you have one fault, which I'm afraid will try your uncle's patience, as it has often tried your father's and mine,—your heedlessness. Why is it you are sometimes so forgetful of things, right under your eyes, that you are expected to attend to?"

"I don't know," said Kit, ruefully. "But I seem to be thinking of something else."

"You must try not to be so absent-minded," the widow resumed, in a tone more of entreaty than of chiding. "Your uncle won't put up with your fault as your father and I have done. If you were a stupid boy, we shouldn't expect so much of you. But you're anything but stupid; you're one of the brightest boys I ever saw, when you have your wits about you."

Kit could not forbear a smile of gratification at this compliment, which was not ill-deserved. He had indeed a village reputation for his witty retorts. "Have you heard Kit's last joke?" was a common query among the East Adam boys, always sure to excite curiosity and provoke a laugh. It was sad now to think what his very last joke was.

Some West Adam boys, with whom the East Adam boys were at war, tried to plague him one day by ridiculing his father's business. They called the tin-shop a *shin-top*, and went bawling through the streets, "Kit's daddy keeps a shin-top! Kit's daddy keeps a shin-top!" to the vexation of Kit, who was sensitive on that point. He kept cool, however, and called out:—

"It's easy enough to sing a silly thing like that, but not one of you can tell what kind of ware you will always find at a *shin-top*." He ridiculed them, in return, for their stupid guesses, and finally informed them that it was a kind of pan. "Don't you know, you numbskulls? A *knee-pan*!"

The West Adamites looked down foolishly at the tops of their own shins, and went off amidst the gleeful laughter of the East Adamites who had heard the dispute.

"They never will sing that again!" his friends said triumphantly.

They never would, indeed! Kit sobered now at the recollection, and thought that he would not mind what anybody said or sang, if his father were only back there in the old tin-shop, and in his broken, lonely home.

CHAPTER II.

KIT ON THE FARM.

IT was corn-planting time, and Kit had a good chance, to begin with, to show his uncle how "useful" he could be on the farm. He took the place of one hired man at the start, and lamed his back and blistered his hands, and got homesick enough, during the first week.

He was a plucky lad, however; and when he went home, on Sunday, he did not show his blisters, nor complain to his mother of the difference between living on the farm and visiting it occasionally. And when she said, with motherly concern, that she feared the work was too hard for him, he replied stoutly:—

"It's pretty hard, as the rat said of the old cheese-rind; but I guess I can stand it, if the cheese can. I'm not like the boy who was apprenticed to a blacksmith, and, after blowing the bellows two days, said he was sorry he had learned the trade."

The widow was cheered to see her boy in such brave spirits, and told him, with a gush of affection, that he was the hope of her life.

Inwardly resolved that she should not be disappointed in him, he returned to the farm, and soon worked off the lameness of his back, his homesickness, and the tenderness of his palms. His muscles hardened, his joints grew strong, his blistered hands became callous, and the longer he stayed the better contented he was with the place.

His one serious fault clung to him, however, and sorely vexed Uncle Gray, who one day declared : —

“ You’re as willing a youngster as ever I see ; but the beatermost dunderpate in all creation. Now, there’s that grass-hook ; you had it a-cutt’n’ off them thistle-tops, and you dropped it somewheres, and, like as not, we never shall see it agin. Why can’t ye take care o’ things ? ”

“ I don’t know,” Kit murmured, penitently. “ I forget.”

“ You forgit ! ” Uncle Gray repeated, sternly. “ You had lost the whetstone afore that ; and I should think I scolded ye enough fer ’t, so you’d ’a’ ben a little mite more careful.”

“ I should think so too ! ” replied Christopher.

“ And where, f’r instance, do you think I found the iron rake that disappeared so strangely ? A-hangin’ in the apple-tree, jest where you had used it last, a-pokin’ at the worms’ nests. It never ’ll du in

the world to go on at this rate! Graj'ally things 'll go, and I sha'n't have a tool to lay my hands on, next I know. Be ye asleep? Or what is the matter?"

Kit smarted under these reproofs all the more because he felt they were deserved. He answered humbly:—

"I don't suppose I am a downright fool; but I do believe there is a *fool-streak* in me. If I get my mind on one thing I go off in a sort of dream, and mind nothing else. I'll try to do better."

"You must!" Uncle Gray insisted. "I want a boy I can depend on; and I never can depend on one that goes blunderin' through the world in this way. Now take my advice, and mind what you're up tu!"

Kit improved somewhat after this. Yet, if a shovel was mislaid, or a heifer overlooked in the milking, or a calf left to bawl for its supper, Kit was always the culprit.

So anxious was he to correct his bad habit that he used often to ask himself in the evening if there was anything he had neglected during the day, and to punish himself by attending to it then, if it was not too late. In this way he reminded himself, one night, as he was going to bed, that when he took care

of the horse after his uncle drove home from the village, he had knocked the whip out of the wagon, and forgotten to pick it up.

"I know just where it is," he said to himself; "and I'm not going to let Uncle Gray find it there in the morning and give me a scolding."

He had pulled off his clothes and put out the light. He pulled them on again in the dark, and went softly down stairs, not meaning to betray his blunder by disturbing the old folks, who had also retired.

He groped his way to the kitchen, and ran his fingers along the door-frame for the key of the stable, which was left there. He found it hanging securely on its nail; for if there was one thing which Uncle Gray would never trust to anybody else, but always looked after himself, it was the locking up, at bedtime, of his barn and dwelling.

The night was dark, for, though there was a moon, according to the almanac, the sky threatened rain, and a few sprinkles fell on Kit's hand as he reached out, feeling for the stable door. This he unlocked, and passed on into the barn, where he felt the buggy all over, to make sure that he had not, in an absent-minded way, put the whip back into it. No; it must be on the grass outside, where it fell.

He had kicked about in search of it as he approached the barn ; but he now went out again and made a more thorough exploration, with both feet and hands. He was rewarded, after a little while, by entangling his toes in the lash (he was barefoot); and with the comfortable consciousness of duty done, having put the whip in place, he groped back into the house.

As he was on his way to the chamber-stairs, his uncle called out to him : —

“That you, Christopher?”

“Yes, sir,” Kit replied, and immediately turned to the water-pail, to provide himself with an excuse for his untimely movements.

“What are you prowling about the house after bedtime for?” Uncle Gray demanded.

“I’m getting a drink of water,” Kit said, which was true enough at that moment.

“Couldn’t you think of that afore you went to bed?” growled Uncle Gray. “I wonder what you will forgit next!”

Alas, what had not Kit already forgotten, in his anxiety to find the whip and get back to bed without arousing the old folks! The morning was to show.

He was awakened shortly after daybreak by his uncle pounding on the stairs with a cane, which he

kept for the purpose, and calling, "Come, boy, time to be stirrin'! Ye gun ter lay abed all day?"

Kit made a yawning answer, and was leisurely pulling on his trousers, when Uncle Gray came again to the stairway, and the voice, rendered harsh by asthma and long experience in driving sluggish oxen, thundered forth:—

"Where's the key to the stable? D'ye know anything about it?"

"Isn't it there?" stammered the boy, remembering with consternation that he had used the key the night before, but utterly unable to remember what he had done with it.

"There? Where?" roared the angry uncle.

"Hanging by the door," faltered Kit.

He fumbled in his pockets as he sat on the bed, frightened, half-dressed, his hair tumbled, a picture of comical dismay, which he perceived by the dim light when he raised his eyes to the looking-glass on the bare wall; although he did not notice anything very comical in it at the time.

"It *aint* hangin' by the door!" said Uncle Gray; "though I'm sure I put it there last night. Have you had it since?"

"I—I believe—I did take it," the guilty one confessed, appearing at the head of the gloomy stair-

way, jacket in hand. "But I thought I put it back again."

"Thought ye put it back agin!" echoed Uncle Gray, with savage sarcasm. "I wonder ye don't forgit to breathe some time. Aint it in yer pockets?"

Kit fumbled again helplessly.

"Ye didn't leave it in the stable-door, did ye?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. I'm afraid I did!" he miserably confessed.

"Don't know! can't remember! afraid ye did!" the ox-compelling voice repeated, yet in tones no laziest ox, nor indeed any creature on that well ordered farm, except the "beatermost dunderpate in all creation," had ever yet called forth.

Uncle Gray withdrew, storming; and Kit, stooping on the topmost stair, hurriedly putting on his shoes, could trace him all the way through sitting-room and kitchen, in the direction of the stable, by the wrathful ejaculations he let fall, dying away like rattling thunder in the distance.

Kit followed without his hat, in the chill dawn, aware that retribution awaited him, but hoping that no serious harm had come of his neglect. That hope was quickly dispelled, however, as he approached the stable.

His uncle had found the door unlocked, with the key in it. He had entered in haste, and was now rushing out again, his eyes glaring excitedly, his hooked nose white as a cheese-paring, and his features in a snarl of terrible wrinkles.

"Now see what's come o' your —" he began, but choked, or hesitated for a word weighty enough to express his wrath and alarm; then spluttered forth, —

"PESKINESS!"

At the same time he pointed at an empty stall.

The guilty Christopher shambled along and looked in. It was the stall of Dandy Jim, the one serviceable horse on the place; but the horse had vanished in the night.

CHAPTER III.

THE STOLEN HORSE.

"**H**AS anything happened?" said Aunt Gray, hooking her dress as she came out of the house, attracted by the little drama at the stable-door. She was a stoutish woman, with a large, round, kindly face, and a head as polished as a melon, before she had got on her false hair for the day.

Instead of answering her, Uncle Gray turned with fresh indignation on Kit.

"What ever possessed ye to come out and unlock the barn after I had once locked it up for the night?"

Kit explained that it was to pick up and put away the whip.

"That was mighty important!" exclaimed Uncle Gray. "Wouldn't the whip stay where it was till mornin', and no gre't harm done?"

"I suppose so," replied Kit. "But I had made up my mind to take care of things soon as ever I could think to; and I thought of that just as I was going to bed. I meant it for the best!" added the conscience-smitten boy.

"Meant it for the best! And so you saved the whip, and let the horse be stole! I never!" And with a gesture of impatience Uncle Gray turned back into the barn.

"What!" ejaculated Aunt Gray, who had finished hooking her dress by this time, — a somewhat formidable operation, — "the hoss haint been stole, has he?"

"I hope not; I don't see how he can have been," said Kit. "To think the thief should come just the very night when the door was left unlocked, — I can't believe it!"

"You don't know how many times thieves may have come and found the door locked," said Aunt Gray. "Though it don't seem to me Dandy can be re'ly stole! Pa!" — she called her husband *pa* — "be ye sure?"

"Sure's I want to be, and a good deal more so," he replied. "The mare is there, but the hoss is gone, stole or not; and the saddle and best bridle's gone with him. A hundr'd and eighty dollars right out of my pocket, if it's a penny!"

He turned once more on Kit. "The idee of your comin' out here at nine o'clock, unlockin' the stable, and leavin' the key in the door, as if to invite tramps and vagabonds to walk in and help themselves! I've no patience with such stupidity!"

"Neither have I!" said Kit, with the candor of abject remorse. "But I don't know how I am to cure myself of it, unless I go and jump into the pond with a ploughshare hitched to my neck. I did mean to do better!"

Seeing his tears begin to fall, Aunt Gray, who could not have compressed a very shrivelled heart under the gown she had been struggling to hook, said, soothingly, —

"Your comin' out here for the whip shows you did mean to, though to patch a little hole you sp'ilt cloth that would have made a garment. You're like the man that went to stop a little leak o' cider, and busted the hoops off his barrel. But there's no use cryin' for spilt milk, nor scoldin' about it, neither. If the hoss is stole, the next thing to be done is to try to find him. Here's Abram; mabby he knows something that 'll clear up the mystery."

Abram was the hired man, who lived in his own home a mile away, and used to come up to the farm every morning. He was as much surprised as anybody to learn that Dandy Jim was gone, with saddle and bridle; and he had to go and look the stalls and pens all over before he would be convinced. Then he suddenly exclaimed, —

"By mighty!"

"What is it?" Uncle Gray asked, eagerly.

"Them hoss-tracks I see, comin' up from the village! This accounts for 'em!"

"Did you see hoss-tracks?" Aunt Gray inquired; while Uncle Gray said frowningly that "hoss-tracks" were plenty enough; the roads were full of 'em.

"But not such tracks as I see this mornin'," replied Abram. "There was a light rain some time in the night and these tracks was made afterwards, as you could see plain enough. I come up the cow-lane, or I might, like enough, have followed 'em to your front gate."

"Here they are!" cried Kit, who was already searching the driveway which led from the barn, past the house, to the street. "Fresh tracks after the rain! There they go! there! there!"

He was off like a hound on a scent, following the tracks to the street. Uncle Gray went more slowly, scrutinizing them with a sight not so keen, and muttering, discouragingly, —

"I guess they're Dandy's tracks, safe enough; but what's the use of any more evidence 't I've lost a hoss? I was sure on 't before."

"We can track him!" cried Kit, earnestly.

"A sight of good that 'll do!" said Uncle Gray.

"You may track him a mile or so; but what'll ye do, f'r instance, when ye find the roads full of all sorts of tracks, as they will be long 'fore you come in sight of the thief?"

"Here are a man's tracks, too!" exclaimed Kit. "He led Dandy past the gate; and here's where he mounted. I'm going to see which way he has gone, before it's too late. I wish the mare was fit to ride!"

"I wouldn't trust her with ye," was Uncle Gray's grim response; "such a blunderhead as you be!"

"But I am going, anyway," Kit declared.

"Nobody'll hinder ye," growled Uncle Gray. 'Go, if ye wan' tu; and I guess, on the hull, ye better not come back 'ithout the hoss."

"Well! I won't!" said Kit, desperately.

"Don't say that, Christopher!" interposed Aunt Gray. "Don't talk that way, pa! you don't mean it."

"Yes, I du! I'm tired of the boy's blunderin', blunderin'! I don't want to see him agin 'thout he brings back Dandy, which, I guess, he'll du about next day after never."

"Christopher!" Aunt Gray called again, raising her voice to be heard in the distance; "wait for a mouthful of breakfast."

"I don't want any breakfast," Kit answered, as he ran.

"Come back for your hat!" screamed Aunt Gray.

Kit did not hear; nor had he the least idea that he had started off on his hopeless chase, after a tolerably well mounted rogue, without a hat to his uncombed head.

He scanned the tracks carefully as he went, noting the difference between those of the hind feet, which were shod, and those of the fore feet, which were not, in places where fore foot and hind foot had left separate prints. He also observed that Dandy had evidently started off on a walk, then struck into a trot, and, finally, been urged to a gallop, when he had got well out of hearing from the house; his strides growing longer, and his feet throwing up the dirt of the roadbed more plentifully, as his speed increased.

The Widow Downimede had barely risen that morning, and her door was still fastened, when it was shaken and pounded violently, and she heard a voice calling, "Hallo! mother! mother!"

"It is Christopher!" she exclaimed, in very great astonishment, which was not lessened, be sure, when she hastened to open the door, and saw him standing

there, hatless, with wild eyes and hair, flushed with running and out of breath.

"Why, my child!" she cried, "what *is* the matter?"

"Don't be frightened," he said. "Uncle's horse has been stolen. The thief has ridden him" — he gasped for breath — "right by the house here. I am on his track."

"My dear boy!" replied the widow, whose first concern was not for the loss of the horse, "you will kill yourself with running!"

"Never fear!" said Kit. "I am all right — only —" panting again — "I started off without my breakfast. Give me a doughnut or two to put in my pocket — to eat — when I have a chance."

On his way to the village he had had time to reflect that he very likely had an all day's chase before him, and that his strength would not hold out without food. He had also discovered the absence of his hat before he was reminded of it by his mother.

"Yes," he said, putting up his hand to his tossed hair, "that's one thing I stopped for — my base ball cap. Where is it?" For, of course, so heedless a lad as Kit was careless of any of his things

at home, and always had to ask his mother for them.

"I'll hunt it up," she replied. "Meanwhile you must eat something—a bowl of bread and milk. Mr. Pierce has just left our pint, and you can have it all."

The can was on the doorstep. Kit took it up and handed it to her, declaring at the same time that he could not stop to eat nor even wait for his base bak cap unless she could put her hand on it at once.

"For I must find that horse," he said, "if such a thing is possible. It was my fault that he was stolen, and I am not to go back to Uncle Gray's without him."

"Why! how did it happen?" asked the astonished widow.

"I left the stable-door unlocked. Uncle Gray was mad as fury, and I don't blame him. I sometimes think I'm half a fool!" And poor Kit burst into tears of self-hatred and grief.

The widow tried to soothe him, as she got him into the house and poured the milk into a bowl on the table before him; yet she could not help speaking reproachfully of his fault.

"I was afraid it would bring you into trouble, and I warned you, — don't you remember I warned you,

Christopher? And now if your uncle has cast you off on account of it, I don't know what we are going to do. I'm so sorry, so sorry! for I don't see the least chance of your finding the horse, unless you have a still faster one to ride."

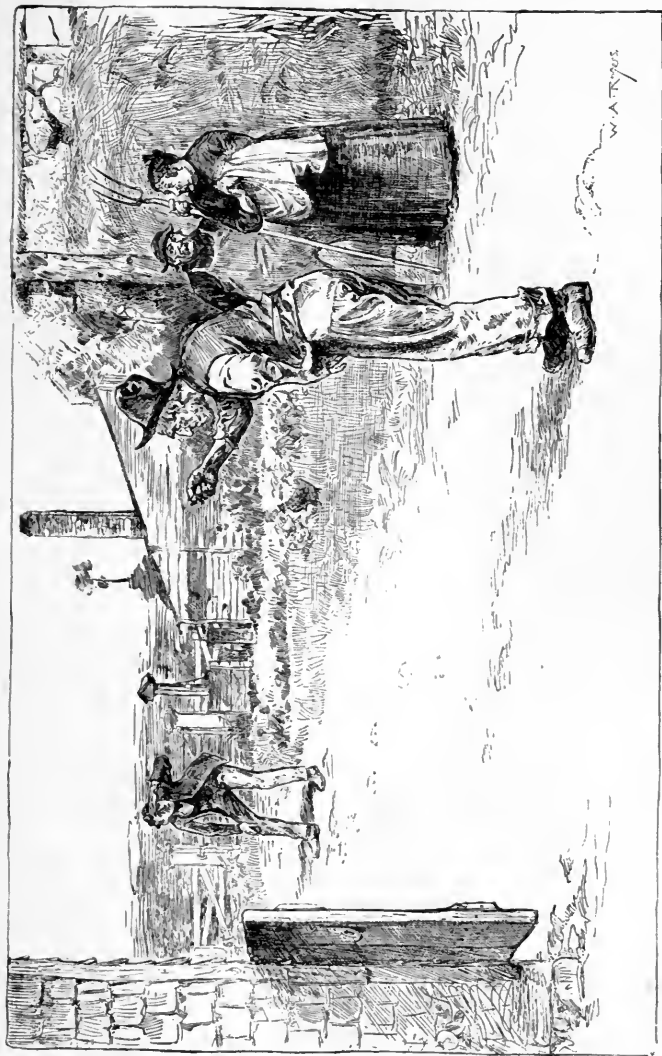
"Well, I haven't got that, and I can't afford to hire one," said Kit, gulping down the milk, for he found that he was thirsty, if not hungry. "I'll take my chances, and if I don't have a horse to ride, why, then, I sha'n't be bothered with one. The thief is not many hours ahead of me, for he started after it stopped raining."

"It rained till two o'clock and after," said the widow, stuffing his pockets with doubled slices of buttered bread. "I was awake; and I remember now, I heard a horse clattering fast along the street about then. I thought of your father's sudden illness, and wondered who was riding fast for the doctor. I think of your father so much, night and day, Christopher!"

Her mind was running off upon her great sorrow; but Kit could not stop to hear. He seized the cap which, with a housekeeper's instinct, she had found and handed him; clapped it on his frizzled pate, took another swallow of milk and a bite of bread, allowing her at the same time to drop some small

change into his pocket, — all she had; then rushed out of the house.

The tracks were still traceable, and they led straight through the village; growing more and more indistinct beyond, however, as they mingled with other tracks made since the rain.



W. A. K. 1893

CHAPTER IV.

FOLLOWING THE TRACKS.

THE sun was but just beginning to shine over the wooded hills and hazy pasture-lands; for it was now September, the month of rapidly shortening days.

Kit found a few people astir in the village, and met two or three teams on the road; but nobody had seen Dandy Jim and his rider. Then a milkman overtook him, and gave him a ride of a mile, but had to turn off on a by-road, while Kit followed the tracks. These were fast becoming obliterated; but by searching carefully at forks and crossings, he could always see enough of them to decide which route the rogue had taken.

He got another ride, in a farmer's wagon; and afterward hung on behind a carriage that was going his way; thus getting over much ground about as fast, he thought, as if he had a horse of his own. The morning was pleasant, the air cool and sweet after the shower, the roadsides were ornamented with golden-rods and asters, while here and there a

sapling or sumach by the fences, or a trailing woodbine on the rough stone walls, touched the landscape with the first bright hues of autumn. But for the great anxiety attending it, Kit would have enjoyed his journey, on such a day, amid those smiling farms.

The road he was on was a great thoroughfare leading to Boston, forty miles away; and he was not long in making up his mind that the rogue had gone thither to dispose of the horse. It was a discouraging prospect for a boy of sixteen, with hardly a dollar in his pocket, and with no friends whose influence he could enlist in his behalf, on the route or in the city itself. But it would be something, at least, to know what course Dandy's rider had taken.

About four miles from home he came to a fork in the highway, and dropped off from behind his carriage (not without regret) to trace the tracks. They had quite disappeared, either obliterated by the increasing travel, or, as Kit thought more probable, because the thief had turned off on the turf to baffle pursuit.

He was carefully looking for them in the sand and in the still wet grass, when a farm boy came along, of whom he made the usual inquiries.

"Have you seen anything of a man on a dark-brown horse, almost black, with a braided foretop?"

"The man almost black, with a braided foretop?" said the young fellow, with a grin.

"No; the horse. I can't describe the man," replied Kit, irritated by such untimely levity.

"I didn't know but you meant the man," said the fellow; "and I didn't want to answer your question without I could do it straight and square. An almost black hoss, with a braided foretop, and a rider?"

"Yes; with little roundish mottles of a lighter brown, about as big as your thumb, along on the sides of his belly."

"The rider?"

"No; the horse," said Kit, indignantly; though he had wit enough of his own to laugh at the fellow's drollery afterward.

"Was he trottin' or canterin'? I mean the hoss," the wag added, as if anxious to avoid further misunderstanding.

Kit explained that Dandy was a trotter, being more accustomed to the harness than the saddle, but that he could gallop when urged.

"But, trotting or galloping," he demanded, "have you seen any horse at all?"

"Yes, I have."

"A dark brown one?"

"Rather dark ; though I didn't notice the braided foretop and the mottles."

"With a rider ?" cried Kit, eagerly.

"No, he hadn't no rider ; he was one of a pair ahead of a two-hoss wagon."

Kit turned again to look for the tracks, angrily resolved to waste no more words on so unpromising a subject.

"What have ye lost ?" said the fellow. "Can I do anything for ye ?"

"Not unless you answer my questions seriously, if you answer them at all. I have lost a horse ; and I should think you might do as you would like to have me do by you, if you were in my place."

"Sho ! Why didn't you say so before ? I didn't know you'd lost a hoss !"

"You might have known ; I was inquiring for him."

"Have you lost a rider, too ? You was inquirin' for a rider with the hoss."

Kit changed the topic abruptly.

"Which of these two roads goes to Boston ?"

"Don't neither on 'em go to Boston ; they stay right where they be."

"That's a pretty old joke," said Kit ; "and unless you can get off a fresh one, you'd better not try to

joke at all. The thief is probably on his way to Boston, and I want to know which road to take to find him."

"Take either on 'em, and you'll most likely find he has took t' other, for they are both roads to Boston," said the rural joker.

He was speaking truth about the general direction of the roads, however; and he afterward atoned for his impertinence by joining in the search for Dandy's tracks.

"Here; what's this?" he cried. Kit hastened to see; and, sure enough, cutting through the thin turf of the roadside into the brown sandy loam beneath, the prints of Dandy's hoofs re-appeared, or some extremely like them.

"Thank you ever so much," exclaimed Kit, heartily forgiving the fellow's waggery. "This is the way he has gone!" And he was off again.

He next made inquiries and begged a ride of a man driving in a light carryall; and he was encouraged to find everybody so ready to help him, when his story was told, even the roadside wag having proved hardly an exception.

The man in the carryall agreed with him that the rogue had probably gone to Boston with the horse; nevertheless, he stopped to allow Kit to look for

tracks at the crossings they passed. At one of these a drove of cattle had come into the highway, as if they had been invented on purpose, Kit said, to follow and cover up all traces of the stolen horse.

A mile or two farther on, he descried a cloud of dust in the distance, and exclaimed: "There's the drove of cattle!" The man touched his horse, and soon came up with a drover urging on the laggards, to whom Kit put his usual question.

"Yes; I've seen sich a hoss—whay! shoo!" said the drover, cracking his whip at a yearling by the fence. "Just after daylight this—go 'long there! will ye?"—crack, crack!—"this mornin'." Kit's heart gave a leap of expectation, and he described more particularly Dandy's marks.

"It was skurcely light enough for me—whay there! ho! ho!—for me to notice the mottles on his sides; but I remember the—git along, you brute!—the braided foretop."

"Where was he?"

"Six or eight miles back here—ho! ho! git!"

"Before you struck this road?"

"Long afore. We had jest got the drove started. Whoop! Jerusalem! boys, look out for the gap in that fence!"

"What sort of a chap was riding him?" Kit asked, in a fever of excitement.

"A youngish chap, not much more'n twenty, I should jedge—hillo! hillo! A fair-spoken feller; nothin' partic'larly noticeable about him. He wanted to sell me the hoss, and turned and rode with me—hish! 'sh!—for half a mile or so. 'Twa'n't so dusty then as 'tis now. Wa'n't much of a shower down this way." Crack, crack! went the whip.

"How was he dressed?"

"Re'ly, I can't tell: I didn't give much 'tention to him; but I kin' o' looked the hoss over,—whish! ho!—he seemed sich a fairish sort of hoss, and he offered him dog-cheap."

"How cheap!" cried Kit.

"He offered him for fifty dollars."

"Dandy Jim for fifty dollars!"

"I've got the chink right here in my pocket," said the drover, pausing to wipe away the dust and sweat under his black felt hat. "But I was jealous everything wa'n't jest ship-shape; feller stumpin' me for a trade that time in the mornin', an' offerin' a beast for less 'n half he's worth. Shouldn't wonder if you could overhaul him, for he'll be offerin' his hoss along on the 'by-roads."

Kit had thought it a great good fortune to get a ride of two or three miles with the man in the carryall ; and indeed it was, for it had enabled him to obtain this positive information from the drover ; but now he had to turn back on his course, which he hurriedly prepared to do, having asked a few more questions, and thanked both men for their assistance.

“ You’re welcome, fur’s I’m concerned,” said the drover, wielding his whip, and shouting again, “ Ho ! hillo ! wish ! Jerusalem ! git along there ! ” as he followed the cattle and the cloud of dust.



"Kit sat down on a stone, with a weary sigh." Page 44.



CHAPTER V.

IN HOT PURSUIT.

"I'D like no better fun than to drive with you, and help hunt up the horse-thief, if I had time," said the man in the carryall. "You've only to follow back the cattle tracks to the yard they left at daybreak, and it won't be long before you hear of the rogue again. Good-by! and luck to you!"

With hopes stronger than ever, if not of overhauling the thief, of finding at least where he disposed of the horse, Kit set off on a run to return to the cross-road. He had slackened his speed to a walk long before he reached it, and he followed it more and more wearily until noon.

Beyond the yard where the cattle had been penned for the night, he thought he could make out Dandy's hoof-prints again; but they were bafflingly uncertain, and he soon gave them up altogether. Nor could he by inquiring hear anything of him or his rider.

"I suppose people along here were hardly stirring when he passed," thought he as he kept on, still

without losing hope. "Or maybe he wanted to get farther away before offering to sell Dandy to anybody but a passing drover."

He turned off at forks and crossings, to look for tracks and make inquiries, but always came back to the road he was following, after losing time and strength and patience in these useless excursions. He was growing quite disheartened and bewildered, when he came to some stone-layers eating their dinner beside an unfinished bank wall.

"We have been at work here since half-past six this morning," said one of them, "and we have seen no man on horseback."

Kit sat down on a stone, with a weary sigh.

"What could have become of him?" he said, thinking aloud rather than addressing the men. "It must have been near six when he left the drover; and I don't believe Dandy could have travelled so far as here in half an hour. I don't know what to do!"

He had eaten his bread and butter while riding with the man in the carryall: and now he could not help looking wistfully at the boiled eggs the men cracked on the edges of their dinner-pails. He was glad, however, they did not offer him what he would have been ashamed to accept, and might not have had the resolution to refuse.

"I tell you what I think," said one, having drained a small can and wiped his milky lips on his bare arm. "I think I have seen your man."

"When? Where?" Kit asked with quickly reviving interest.

"You know, boys, when I went for the drill. Coming through Hillard's grove, I was near stumbling over a man stretched out fast asleep on the ground, while a hoss was grazing in a grassy hollow. I think that was your man, and I think that was your hoss."

Kit thought so, too, so surely that he forgot all about his hunger and weariness and waning hopes, and was on his feet again in an instant, plying the stone-layer with questions.

"He sat up, and put on his hat, which had fallen off where he slept, and looked at me saucy-like; but, as I said nothing to him, he said nothing to me. Yes, it was a darkish hoss, with a saddle, and his bridle was slipped back on his neck, with the reins made fast to a loose branch on the ground, to keep him from walking away. It was about three hours ago, and that is the grove in sight yonder; you've just come past it."

The speaker had not noticed Dandy's distinguishing marks; but there could not be much doubt that

the horse he had seen was Dandy himself. He told Kit how to find an overgrown wagon-track leading into the woods, and the grassy hollow where he had seen the grazing animal and the sleeping man.

The boy had to go back on his course again, but not far ; and he was soon following the path among the undergrowth. Fresh hoof-prints in soft places amidst the roots and dead leaves corroborated the laborer's story ; they led to the grassy hollow where a spot which some beast had lately grazed was plainly to be seen, near another that showed an impression, like that of a human form, on the bank.

"It must have been a man that lay here ; that shows," said Kit, turning over a tobacco quid with his foot.

Of course, neither man nor horse was there then ; but he was able to follow the prints along a winding cart-track, through beautiful open, sun-spotted woods, until he came to a pair of posts with three bars, the two upper ones of which were let down.

"To take Dandy through," said Kit to himself. "Here are his tracks still !" and he followed them into a wild, rocky, and hilly road beyond.

Not far along were some men gathering squashes in a field, and Kit shouted his question at them across a brier-overgrown stone wall.

"Yes, we've seen a man with just such a horse," one shouted back from a wagon, in which he stood catching the squashes another man and a boy tossed up at him.

In spite of the briers, Kit was over the wall in a moment, and the squash-gatherers stopped their work to hear his eager questions.

"No," said the man in the wagon, "I didn't notice the braided foretop nor the spots you describe alongside the belly. The fellow wanted to sell or trade his horse; but as I didn't want either to buy or swap, I didn't take the trouble to go and look at his beast. I guess you'll hear of him further up the road."

All the boy's hope and strength seemed to come back with the joy of this good news. How glad he now was that he had not given over the pursuit, as more than once, in his discouragement and fatigue, he had been tempted to do! And how fortunate that he had got so early a start, after the theft was discovered!

"Perhaps Uncle Gray will take back some of his hard words," he said, anticipating the triumph of riding Dandy home, or of carrying a certain clew to his whereabouts. "And how pleased mother will be!"

He heard of the horse at two or three places, and at last got a ride with a young farmer, who gave him a startling piece of information.

"I've seen your horse-thief, certain as the world! He wanted to sell me the animal for a hundred dollars, and I think I might have bought him, but I don't like to take a horse on my hands. I don't know, for fear there may be something wrong about him."

Kit described Dandy's marks.

"Yes, by George!" said the farmer. "I looked at his feet, and remember he had no shoes before. His foretop wasn't braided, but it was crinkled, as if it had been braided and the braids lately taken out. A cunning thief would be apt to do that."

He also remembered the mottles on the sides. Kit asked excitedly when and where this was.

"A little before noon. The fellow stopped to get dinner and bait his horse at my father-in-law's, the next house to mine. It's just possible he's there now. I've been down the road a little piece since dinner, and am just driving home."

He whipped up his horse; while Kit, with impatient expectation, strained his eyes gazing ahead at the father-in-law's house in the distance. The young farmer drove rapidly by his own door, and turned up

at the next front yard. The father-in-law himself came out leisurely to meet him.

"Where's that fellow who took dinner here, and had the horse to sell?" cried the young farmer. To which the old farmer responded, with deliberation strangely in contrast with Kit's breathless excitement:—

"That chap? he's been gone an hour. He hung round, trying to get me to make him an offer, till I fairly had to send him away."

"It's too bad!" said the young man. "The horse was stolen, and he belongs to this boy's uncle. Where did he go?"

The old farmer looked at Kit's changing countenance, and replied:—

"I said to him, 'The best place to sell your horse is over at Peaceville, at the cattle-show.' 'Is there a cattle-show at Peaceville?' said he. 'Yes,' I said; 'it opens to-day, and holds to-day and to-morrow.' 'That's an idea,' said he; 'how far is it?' I told him about eight miles; then he wanted to know the best way to get there, and started off. I've no doubt but he will go straight to the cattle-show with his stolen horse, if he don't sell him on the way."

"What did he say for himself? What sort of a looking man was he?" Kit asked.

"He said he had been to collect a bad debt, and had been obliged to take a horse he didn't want, and that was why he was willing to dispose of him at any price. But I didn't take much stock in him, though he was a rather good-looking, pleasant fellow. Sallow-complected, no beard, about average height, wore a common-looking suit of some sort of dark checked goods, and a narrow-brimmed, low-crowned straw hat."

All this corresponded well with what Kit had heard before, and enabled him to form in his mind so distinct an image of the fugitive that he felt almost sure he would recognize him when he saw him, even if he was not riding Dandy.

"Do you suppose he has really gone to the cattle-show?" he asked, turning to the younger farmer. "Or might he not have made a pretence of going, to throw pursuers off his track?"

"Either is likely enough ; but I think it most probable he will try to sell the horse at the fair. That being in another county, and so far away, he wont expect to meet any of your neighbors there who know the animal. Your best course," the young man added, "will be to take the road to Peaceville, and inquire for him as you go along."

"I think so myself. And I must lose no time !"

Adding a word of hearty thanks, Kit was stepping down from the wagon, when the young man stopped him.

"Sit still ; I'll drive you over to the main road you are to strike ; I only wish I could go all the way !"

"I wish you could !" exclaimed the grateful boy. "But I shall be glad of even a little lift."

He was beginning to feel more footsore and leg-weary than he had ever been in his life, and it was with pain and repugnance that he got down upon the roadside where the friendly young farmer was obliged to leave him. His stomach was empty and faint, and there was a spot in the small of his back which seemed to be getting tired of its share in the day's business, and threatening to strike work altogether.

He did not think he could afford a minute's time to rest, or even to get a bite at a farm-house, so much depended on the expedition with which he followed the thief. He had quenched his thirst at wayside wells and springs, and helped himself to apples in orchards he passed ; and with such scanty refreshment, he trudged wearily on.

The sun was near setting when, dusty and haggard and spent, he came in sight of the cool meadows and sluggish, winding river on the pleas-

ant outskirts of Peaceville. From afar off he was shown the high-towered fair building, in the midst of the grounds where the cattle-show was held ; and at last the colossal image of an ox-yoke above a broad, open gateway assured his anxiously beating heart that he had arrived at the entrance.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE CATTLE-SHOW.

WHEN the gate-keeper asked for his ticket, Kit in return inquired for Dandy and his rider. The man shook his head.

"I have seen too many horses to remember any particular one," he said. "Your man may have left his horse outside, or he may have taken him in ; I can't tell."

"Shall I have to pay to go in?" Kit asked, having learned that a ticket of admission cost half a dollar. "I haven't come to see the fair, only to hunt for a stolen horse."

The man took out his watch, then looked Kit over carefully.

"All right," he said. "It's the tail-end of the show for to-day, anyway." And he turned back into the grounds, accompanied by Kit.

The man appeared interested in something taking place on the other side of a railing that swept around in a wide curve near the entrance, inclosing, as Kit

found, that indispensable feature of the agricultural fair ground, the trotting-park.

There was a crowd of spectators farther along, on the side where he was, while beyond, far away on the broad, well trodden circular track, he saw half a dozen or more horses with light gigs coming swiftly around toward him. Each gig had its occupant perched on the little frame that served as a seat, ridiculously close to the tail of the trotter he was urging. The dust of the track leaped up like flames, in dull gray puffs, under the flying hoofs, rose in a cloud behind, and gradually mingled with a ring of thin, dingy haze, of like earthy origin, overhanging the entire race-course.

Four or five of the trotters fell behind, and became scattered along the track, while two passed, nearly abreast, the spot where Kit was, and shot by the judges' stand, — a square-roofed tower inside the track, — amid a tumult of cheers from the crowd without. Somebody's horse had won ; Kit did not care whose ; he only waited to see that Dandy Jim was not on the track, — for which absurd idea he laughed at himself well afterward, — then turned to look through the stables behind the course.

He found only blooded animals there, and soon satisfied himself that it was not the place to look for

Dandy Jim. Meanwhile, some visitors who had their teams in the fair grounds were hitching them up, and driving out. He scanned them rapidly, and, hastening across the field amid a throng of pedestrians taking their departure, found a number of horses, some harnessed to wagons and some detached, tied to ropes or rails between the race-course and the central fair building or pavilion.

With a heart full of distressing anxiety, he looked at every animal, but Dandy Jim was nowhere to be seen. Was his toilsome journey, then, in vain? Had the thief, whom he had traced until within a mile or two of the village, suddenly taken another turn and eluded him? Or had the horse been actually brought there, and sold, and taken away again, before his arrival? This was the result he had dreaded most, and a final, sickening fear settled upon him that this was what had occurred.

The far-spreading fields of the river-bottom were already in shadow, and the sunshine was fast fading from the wooded hills; evening was closing in with a beauty and dewy coolness which made the movements of the crowds and the dusty canopy over the race-track seem something alien and strange. The bell at the judges' stand was tinkling for starts and recalls, and everybody who was not leaving the

grounds appeared interested in the next heat to be run. Nobody noticed or cared for poor Kit, not even a policeman to whom he appealed ; and in all these throngs he saw not a face he knew.

There were fruit-wagons and ginger-beer carts, side-shows and refreshment-tents, farther along ; while a distant sound of lowing and bleating told him that the cattle-sheds were on the other side of the grounds. He determined to make the tour of them, asking for Dandy of every man who would give him a moment's attention. He did not stop to take a peep at the living mermaid, whose life-size, high-colored picture adorned the canvas over her tank ; nor to see "the finest museum of curiosities" ever opened to an ungrateful world, for the low price of ten cents ; nor to try his luck at swinging the ball around the peg, a little game by which he was told by the proprietor that there was a chance to win a small fortune.

But here Kit, looking for friendly faces to address his questions to, suddenly stopped.

"It beats the deuce !" said a young man, giving the ball a final spiteful swing. "When I swung it just for fun, I could knock down the peg by the return swing every time. But as sure as I put up my money I knock it down the other way, and lose. How do you manage it, old Punkin-eater ?"

"It's all luck," replied the proprietor, coolly pocketing his dimes. "Walk up, don't be afraid, gentlemen! You pay ten cents for a swing, and if you knock the peg down with the ball coming back, you win half a dollar; five for one. Try it?"

He appealed to Kit in vain; Kit, just then, had his fascinated eyes on the young man who had been losing. Suddenly he stepped forward and extended his hand with the eagerness of one snatching at the smallest chance of friendly assistance, exclaiming:—

"Cassius Brunlow!"

Cassius Brunlow gave a start of surprise, and eyed him sharply.

"You have slightly got the advantage of me, young man," he replied, coolly.

"Don't you know me? You used to work for my father, in the tin-shop. I am Kit!"

"Ah! Kit, indeed? But, great Grimes! what has happened to you? You look as if you had been seeing the elephant, and got slightly stepped on. How's your dad? It's years and years since I've been among the East Adam folks."

The young man rattled away so glibly that it was some moments before Kit could tell his story. Then he said, appealingly:—

"My father is dead. And I am living with Uncle

Gray. His horse was stolen last night ; I have traced him to this town, and, I think, to this cattle-show. I don't know anybody here — and I am so glad I have met you !”

Mr. Cassius Brunlow opened his eyes and held his breath a second or two before exclaiming :—

“What a volley of thunderbolts you fire off at a poor mortal, all at once ! Your father dead ? Just as I was thinking of going back to work for him again ! The best man I ever did a stroke for in seven States ! And your uncle's—what did you say ?—his horse stolen ?”

“Yes ; I've been travelling all day to find him. And now, here I am, at night, twenty miles from home,—though it's farther than that the way I've come,—in a place where I don't know a soul, and I don't know what to do !” Here poor Kit's voice broke.

“Do ?” cried Mr. Cassius Brunlow, cheeringly. “I'll tell you what you must do. Step into this hash-shop with me, and get a lunch the first thing. That's what you need.”

“I can't do that,” replied Kit, “till I have found the horse. Come around here with me ; I have looked everywhere except on the side of the cattle-pens.”

“There are no horses over there,” said Brunlow,

very positively, "and I don't believe the man who took yours would be likely to bring him to so public a place as this. Though I must say it seems to be a great resort for doubtful characters of all kinds. Aint it a shame," he went on, without giving Kit a chance to reply, "that the agricultural fair—an institution from which so much good is expected—should have run out as it has of late years, and been given over almost entirely to horse-racing? Look around you here to-day, and what do you see?"

"I don't see what I want to—my uncle's horse!" said Christopher.

"A few calves and pigs, a little show of fruit and garden stuff—I could eat all the pears and grapes there in the hall in a few hours!" Mr. Brunlow declared. "And what else is there besides the horse-trotting? That I call demoralizing. But it's of a piece with some of these outside shows. There's that little game of swinging the ball, for example."

"The one you were just now playing?" queried Christopher, surprised to hear his old acquaintance criticise the management of the cattle-show from a moral point of view.

"I wished to see if it was anything more than the

miserable game of chance which I proved it to be," replied Brunlow. "I call it a disgrace to New England agriculture that such a thing should be allowed at any of its annual exhibitions! Don't you?"

"It doesn't seem to be just right," said Christopher. "I hadn't thought about it before. I can't think of anything but Uncle Gray's horse!" And he gazed anxiously around.

"Your Uncle Gray, as I remember him," said Cassius, "is a most excellent man, with a nose like a short sickle, and a tendency to asthma. It's too bad about his horse! I must try to help you find him."

"I should be so glad if you would!" exclaimed the grateful Christopher.

"Of course I will," rejoined Brunlow. "Now let's see! If the fellow was so foolish as to bring him to a show like this —"

"It's out of our county, and a long way from the place where the horse is known," suggested Kit. "I don't believe there's anybody here from our town but me."

"I hadn't thought of that. And you say you have traced him to Peaceville?"

"I am sure of it!"

"In that case," said Brunlow, "you're doing a very unwise thing to stand talking with me here. Don't you see? The rascal may not yet have brought him into the ground; or, if he has, he may spy you out, and get off with him while you are gawping about. I'll tell you what's your scheme. You should be at the entrance, where you'll be sure to see him if he takes the horse out or in. You made a mistake leaving it."

"Perhaps I did," poor Kit murmured. "But I thought there might be some other way out, and I could look around in a few minutes."

"There's no other way out; and you'd better leave me to look around for you. Describe the horse, so I shall know him if I see him."

Kit described Dandy's points, which Cassius rehearsed after him, telling them off on his fingers.

"A dark brown horse" (first finger). "Mottled with lighter spots on his sides" (second ditto). "Foretop looks like it had been lately braided—shod behind, not before—yes! yes! I've got him!" said Brunlow, touching fingers number three and four.

"You've got him?" repeated the startled Christopher.

"On my fingers," Brunlow smilingly explained.

"And here!" touching his forehead. "I shall know him when I see him. Light brown, with darker spots —"

"No, no!" cried Kit. "Dark brown, with lighter, roundish mottles —"

"Certainly! Aint that what I said? I'll look at every horse on the ground, and if he's shod before and not behind —"

"Behind, and not before!" interrupted Christopher.

"Hear me out!" continued Brunlow. "If he's shod before, and not behind, I shall know at once he aint your horse. Now rush to the gate, and don't leave it till I meet you there. We'll have your nag, and trap the rogue, too, if they're on this ground."

Kit started to run toward the entrance; while Mr. Cassius Brunlow, instead of devoting his time and energies at once to making the promised search, stood holding Dandy Jim poised on the ends of his fingers, and smilingly watching the boy as he scudded away across the open field amid the scattered pedestrians.

Suddenly Mr. Cassius snapped Dandy off his finger-tips, and uttered his favorite exclamation: —

"GREAT GRIMES!"

This was called out by an unexpected movement on the part of Christopher, who, seeing some wagons over on the side of the cattle-pens, and reasoning that where wagons were horses were likely to be, notwithstanding Brunlow's positive assurance to the contrary and the fact that none were in sight, turned aside from his course, in order to give a rapid look in that direction.

"I can see at the same time if anybody on horse-back passes in or out," he said to himself, keeping an eye on the entrance while hastening to the sheds.

These were mostly empty, the great annual cattle-show having dwindled, as Brunlow truly observed, to a mere horse-racing affair, with a pretty exhibition of fruits and vegetables and a little live-stock thrown in as additional attractions. A few of the pens were occupied by handsome bulls and heifers and noble-looking swine, which nobody seemed interested in just then ; while the owners of the wagons Kit saw had taken advantage of the condition of things by slipping their horses into the least dilapidated of the ancient-looking unused sheds.

These owners, like almost everybody who was not leaving the grounds, were over at the trotting-course. It was getting late, and the sheds were

in shadow. Each had two or three bars up, shutting in the horses, some of which were loosely harnessed, while the harnesses of others had been stripped off, and left in the wagons near by, or thrown across the low partitions of boards dividing the pens.

In the gloom of these low-roofed stalls three or four of the animals looked much alike, and all appeared dark enough to be Dandy Jims to the wild-eyed boy peering eagerly over the bars. But at sight of one he gave a cry of joy.

“Dandy ! Dandy Jim !”

And the horse gave a quick, low whinny of recognition.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW CASH BRUNLOW HELPED.

KIT'S heart almost jumped over the bars before him, in his exultation ; but he managed to tumble along with it, and in a moment he was at the horse's head.

Dandy was not hitched, his bridle having been taken off with the saddle, and thrown over the boards separating that pen from the next. Kit examined his forelock and found it not braided but crinkled, as the young farmer had described. He backed him around to the light and saw the mottles under his sides. He lifted his feet, one after another, and saw that he was shoeless before and shod behind.

Then he gave a chuckling, gleeful laugh, thrilled through and through with the delight of his discovery. It was no feverish dream ; he had the stolen horse at last !

He dropped the topmost bar, and, tumbling out again, saw Mr. Cassius Brunlow hastening toward him.

"I've got him! I've got him!" said Kit, triumphantly, feeling amply paid for all his pains, and forgetting once more his hunger and fatigue.

"You don't say!" said Cassius. "Well, that's better luck than I expected. I had just discovered these wagons, and was coming over to have a look myself. Is that the saddle?"

"That's the saddle, and that's the bridle. I've found everything but the thief. I'd give something now," said the exultant Christopher, "to set eyes on him!"

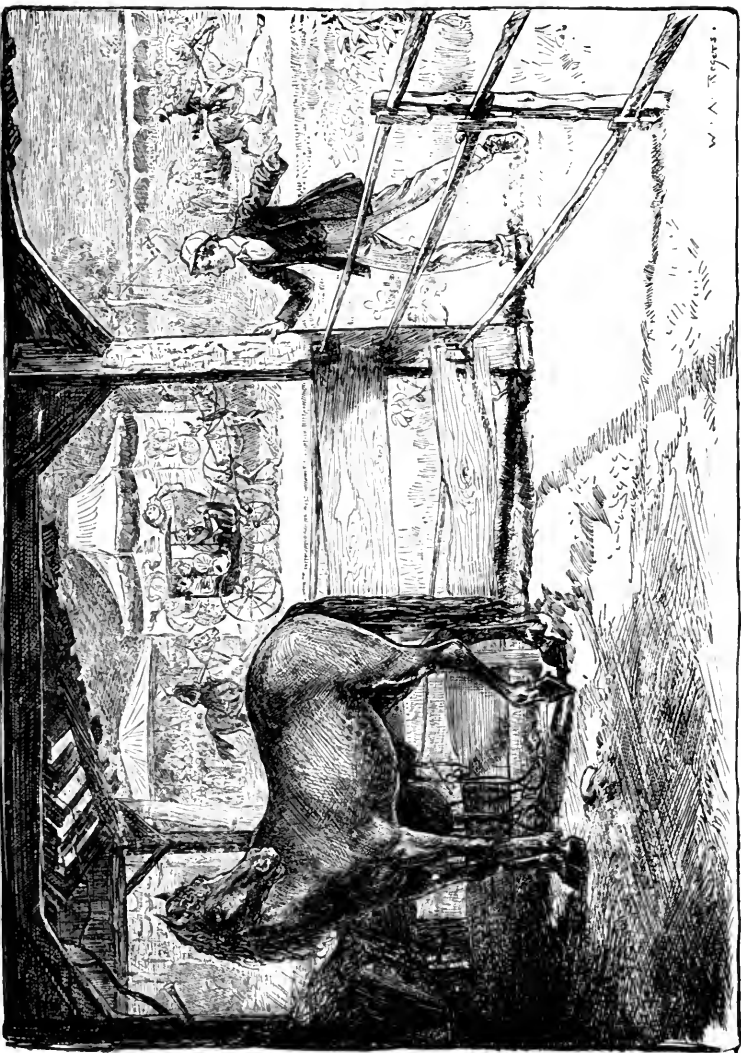
"What would you do?" Mr. Brunlow inquired.

"I'd find the policeman I spoke to, and have the scoundrel arrested. I'd pay him for giving me all this trouble!"

"Yes, that would be fun, though you might be giving yourself a deal more trouble. I know how these things work; and I advise you, now you've found the horse, to secure him, and not mind much about the thief, who will be too shrewd to get caught. That is," added the friendly Cassius, "unless you care more for revenge than you do for your own convenience."

"I'd like to punish him!" said Kit, with sparkling eyes.

"In that case, we can leave the horse and go off



one side and watch when he comes to take him," suggested Mr. Brunlow. "We might lie in ambush under these sheds; but the trouble is, he is probably watching us, and will keep out of the way."

"I wish it wasn't quite so late," said Kit. "I'd like to get Dandy home to-night."

"To do that, you'll have to start at once; and I'd advise you not to lose time by stopping to punish anybody."

"He may have sold the horse." Kit grew thoughtful. "I think I'd better see the policeman I spoke to, anyway. He was more interested in the racing than he was in my story; but he told me to look for the horse, and, if I found him, to come back and let him know."

"Of course, you will act as you please," Mr. Brunlow replied, discouragingly. "But I advise you to do nothing of the sort. Tell him you've found a stolen horse; and what does he say? He says, 'Prove property, and take him.' But how can you prove property?"

"Why, I know Dandy, and Dandy knows me! You know me, too, Cash Brunlow!"

"But the policeman don't know you, nor me, either. I can swear I have known you three years, and believe you to be an honest boy. But how will

he know I'm not a rogue myself? At such times the best men are liable to be suspected."

"There's something in that," Kit admitted.

"Then, if the thief comes forward, matters may get worse mixed. Suppose he's an honest-appearing fellow, as many of these rascals are; swears up and down the horse belongs to him, and you are the rogue, trying to get him away? What'll be the result? You'll both be arrested, probably, and kept, nobody knows how many days, in the lock-up, till your uncle and two or three witnesses can be sent for, and the thing at last gets straightened out."

"I hadn't thought of all this," Kit replied.

"As a friend, let me think for you, and show you how to take advantage of the situation. Possession is nine points of the law. Here you are. Here's your horse. There's the saddle. Clap saddle on horse, pitch self on saddle, and off. Any complications regarding the thief, or any supposed new owner he may have been sold to, can best be settled after you have got him into your uncle's stable at home."

"I see," said Kit, bewildered by this rapidly uttered advice.

"They are just calling another heat, over on the trotting-ground," Mr. Cash Brunlow continued.

"Everybody is crowding to see it. The coast is clear. You've just time to run over to the pie-shop and get a bite for your journey. I'll have everything ready by the time you come back. Or will you start on an empty stomach?"

Kit felt that his stomach was almost too empty for that, and considered this counsel good.

"Dandy was fed at noon; and now, if *I* am fed," said he, "we can make the home-stretch in a hurry!"

"Now you talk sense," replied Cassius. "Lucky you came across me just as you did! Do you need any money?" — putting a hand into his pocket.

"No, thank you; I have some. Only look out for Dandy while I am gone. And the thief, if he comes around."

"How shall I know him?"

"Haven't I told you?" said Kit. "I picked up a complete description of him in making inquiries on the road."

"Indeed!" said Cassius, gayly. "That's lucky. Give us the points."

"Young fellow, not much over twenty," began Christopher.

"Good!" exclaimed Brunlow, getting his fingers ready, and touching the tip of his left forefinger with

the tip of his right. "Young fellow, not over twenty."

"Sallow complexion," Kit went on. "Smooth face. Suit of dark, checked cloth. Narrow-brimmed straw hat. Medium height."

"All right," said Brunlow, having recited each item after Christopher, and tallied it duly on its particular digit. "Medium height," adding the thumb of his right hand to his little mnemonic system. "I see him!"

"See him?" cried Kit, eagerly.

"Yes, in my mind's eye. I should know him in the biggest crowd by such a description as that."

"Would you?" said Kit, wondering at this confidence. "I've been afraid I might pass him; so many men dress and look about alike."

"That's true. But it aint probable any two men have all these six points," said Brunlow, holding up his four fingers and two thumbs. "Now make tracks, stuff your pockets, and be back here by the time I get the saddle and bridle on. I'll stand guard."

It was a great satisfaction to Christopher to feel that he had a friend to aid and advise him in this difficulty. For the trouble was not all over, by any means, when he had found the horse; the

next thing, he now saw, was to get safely off with him.

"How kind he was to offer me money!" he said to himself. "I wouldn't have believed that I should ever be so glad to see Cash Brunlow. I guess he has changed a good deal since he worked in the shop."

That was not exactly years and years ago, as Mr. Brunlow had said, in his extravagant way, but barely eighteen months. He had been a restless, untrustworthy fellow then. He was an apt mechanic, but inclined to slight his work, and he could never stick to it long at a time. When tired of staying in one place, and doing one thing, he would suddenly pack his little kit of tools, and set off on his travels, picking up a precarious living as an itinerant tinker.

He was about twenty-six years old, though he appeared somewhat younger; and in the past four years he had come back twice to Mr. Downimede's shop, working for him a few months at a time in the intervals of his wanderings. Kit had a faint impression that he had been sent off the last time for some discreditable conduct, but he could not remember what it was.

"Mother never liked him," the boy thought; "but she will be glad to know he has done me this good turn."

Still, even with Cassius Brunlow to stand guard over Dandy, Kit was unwilling to be out of sight of the horse many seconds ; he looked back as he ran, and in a very short time might have been seen returning, his pockets bulging with oyster-crackers, and a half-eaten wedge of pie in his hand.

Cassius advanced a few steps to meet him, beckoning impatiently.

"Stow the last of that fodder in your shirt-bosom," he said, alluding to the pie, "what you can't stuff into your fly-trap," meaning Kit's mouth, "and tumble into that saddle quick as ever you can."

His hurried manner of speaking filled Kit with a kind of trepidation, though he couldn't see what fresh cause there was for alarm.

"The trotters are coming around in the last heat," Brunlow muttered excitedly. "The races will be over in a minute. Then there'll be a rush ! We must be out of this before the crowd comes."

"You have saddled and bridled him ?" said Kit, stopping at the bars, which his friend had let down for him, and peering into the shed.

"He is all ready," said Brunlow, following him in. "Foot in stirrup — there !" giving him a boost. "Don't hit your head ! the roof is confoundedly low.

How are the stirrups? I took 'em up a few holes by guess."

"They are all right," mumbled Kit, with the last of the pie-crumbs still obstructing his speech, while his pockets dropped oyster-crackers. "Where do you live now, —if I should want to know?"

He had that day resolved and re-resolved that he would "think of things" in future; and he afterward prided himself on having, in a moment of haste, considered a point which might prove important.

"Right here in the village; at work in the stove-store. Don't stop to thank me," said Cash, with the utmost urgency, helping to get the reins into Kit's hands; for Kit was not much of a horseman, and the lowness of the shed-roof compelled him to bend forward awkwardly on the horse's neck.

"See who comes to take him; spot the thief if you can, and let us know!" mumbled Kit, with his mouth in the horse's mane.

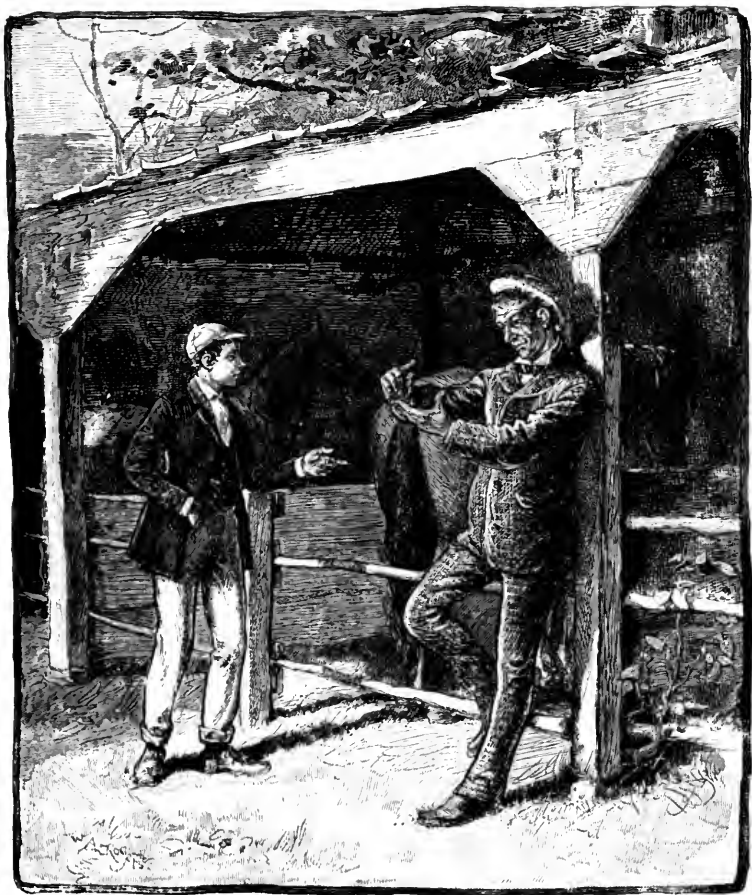
"I'll spot him if he comes round," replied Brunlow. "I've got him on my fingers; dark complexion, checked shirt, and the rest."

"*Sallow* complexion, dark checked *suit*," Kit corrected him, as he rode out from under the shed.

"To be sure. I understand. Good-by, and luck to you!"

And having got the animal well over the bars, Brunlow gave him a parting slap. He started away at a trot.

“Good-by ! ” Kit called back across his shoulder. And he was off.



“‘Good!’ exclaimed Brunlow, getting his fingers ready.” *Page 69.*

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HOME-STRETCH.

THE racing was over. The cheers for the victors swelled in the damp evening air, and died away. A thin mist, rising from the river and the shores, was mingling with the nimbus of dust above the trotting-course, and the black mass of humanity there against the twilight sky was breaking up into scattering throngs when a boy, wearing a base-ball cap, mounted on a dark horse, rode out briskly from the fair ground, passed beneath the huge symbol of an ox-yoke over the gateway, amid a few dodging pedestrians, and disappeared down the dim street.

Kit knew there must be a nearer way home than the roundabout one he had come, and found, by inquiring, that he had struck it on leaving the village. He watered his horse at a wayside trough ; and was pleased to find him so spirited after his day's jaunt.

"But, of course," he thought, "it hasn't been so hard on Dandy as it has on me. He has fed and rested, and now he knows he is going home."

The short twilight of the fall equinox was deepening into night ; and the moon would not be up for an hour. But with the plain road before him, Kit did not care for the gloomy prospect. His food refreshed him ; he munched his crackers as he rode. The air was deliciously cool, and he found rest in the saddle after being so long on his aching feet.

The horse needed little urging. His hard trotting shook Kit up badly ; but his canter was not so objectionable ; and when tired of both canter and trot, Kit found him capable of a fast walk.

"You do well, Dandy, after your day's run with a thief !" he said, cheeringly. "I didn't know there was so much go in you. I wish I could have found the rascal ; and it seems as if I might."

He was not at all satisfied with his failure in that particular ; and now, with twinges of conscience, he reflected that Dandy might already have been sold to an innocent purchaser.

"It was almost like stealing my own horse !" he thought, with a sense of something wrong in the transaction. "I'm afraid I ought not to have been so ready to take Cash Brunlow's advice. With him to help me, nobody could have got Dandy away again. Though I might have been bothered a good

deal, as he said ; perhaps hindered a day or two, till Uncle Gray could be sent for."

Still he was haunted by an uneasy feeling that he had not pursued the most courageous and upright course; together with very disagreeable memories of things he had heard said of Mr. Cash Brunlow in East Adam village.

"But he seems changed ; he certainly was kind to me," Kit comforted himself with thinking. "Why should he have taken such pains to help me off with Dandy, if he hadn't thought it was for the best? Anyhow, I have got the horse! And Cash can attend to any one who comes to claim him, just as well as if I was there."

Meanwhile, the autumnal night had closed around him, damp and chill, with far-stretching shadows infolding farms and woods, and silence disturbed only by the thud of his horse's hoofs, and occasionally an insect's melancholy note. No light save that of the stars, shining hazily overhead, and here and there a gleam in some wayside window as he passed.

But now the soft radiance of the rising moon began to brighten the east. It grew to a dome of fire, and rolled up, a vast burning ball, on the horizon, with an increasing light, which mingled silverly with the mist that mantled the earth. Then the

shadows passed from Kit's mind, and he thought only of the triumph of taking Dandy home.

Unaccustomed to the saddle, he was tired enough of it before long. He trotted, he cantered, he let the horse walk; he tried all possible positions, except riding backwards, to ease his jolted body and sore limbs. He missed the way two or three times, and once went some distance out of it ere he met a man, who set him right.

At last he began to recognize familiar scenes, and knew the streets of his native village, which appeared, however, strange and romantic in the moonlight to him, riding through. He remembered the anxious haste with which he traversed them on foot in the morning, which now seemed many days ago, and, with a glad heart, patted his horse's neck.

The belfry clock was striking eleven as he approached his mother's house, and saw a lamp burning in the front window.

"She is sitting up for me!" he thought, with a thrill which sent quick tears into his dimming eyes. "Wont she be pleased!"

He rode up to the little gate. Before he could dismount, the maternal ears, intently listening within, caught the sound of halting hoof-beats, and a window was thrown open.

"Is that you, Christopher?" said the widow, putting out her head.

"Yes'm!" cried Kit, eagerly. "I've got the horse!"

"I'm thankful!" she exclaimed, devoutly, a great burden of anxiety lifted from her mind by that good news. "I didn't believe it possible! I have been concerned about you all day, and blamed myself for letting you go off with so little money. How did you succeed? Your uncle has been here, and he said it was a wild-goose chase."

"So it was," cried the exultant Kit. "But I have got the goose."

"Can't you come in and have some supper?"

"No, I'm not very hungry. I must hurry along and let Uncle Gray know. I'll see you and tell you everything to-morrow."

"You've had a hard time, I know!" said the sympathetic mother.

"Yes, but I've got my pay; the nut's all the sweeter for the cracking," laughed Kit. "I'm glad I saw you. Now go to bed and sleep."

"Yes, I will. Bless you, my son! Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

And Kit rode away in the moonlight. The sound of the hoof-strokes could be heard long after horse

and rider had disappeared up the half-moonlit, shadowy street ; and it was not until they had died in the distance that the window was closed, and the widow turned away from fondly gazing and listening, murmuring "Bless the dear boy !" with a sigh of grateful relief.

The lights were out in his uncle's house when he came in sight of it ; nobody was sitting up for him there.

Yet good Uncle and Aunt Gray were not asleep. He was too conscientious a man to feel quite at ease about the boy he had parted with angrily in the morning, let alone the loss of the horse ; and she had flung out more than once her very positive opinions on that painful subject.

He had come home late from a harassing day's quest of both boy and horse ; and, in his nervous state, he thought it too bad that, instead of the sympathy he craved, she should bestow upon him so much superfluous good advice of the retrospective sort.

"There's no use tellin' me over and over agin what I'd better have done," he replied to one of her arguments, groaning and turning on his pillow. "Why can't ye tell me what to do now ? You're so wise about things past and done for, I wish you

could show half as much wisdom regardin' the present and futur'. Tell me how to find the hoss, for one thing."

"One would think your life was bound up in a hoss!" Aunt Gray replied. "I don't see as it's any such terrible calamity, if we never see Dandy Jim again. You've money enough to replace him without hardly feeling it."

"I don't care about the hoss!" said Uncle Gray, impatiently.

"I wish you had been of that opinion in the mornin'," his wife answered, quietly. "One would have thought you cared something about him, by the way you took on. It seemed to me you cared more for him than you did for Christopher. The idee of your fairly sending the boy off your premises, and ordering him never to set foot on 'em again without the hoss!"

"There it is agin! I had no notion he would take me at my word," said Uncle Gray.

"Anybody who heard you would have thought a boy of spirit would take you at your word," Aunt Gray replied, with calm persistence. "And Christopher is a boy of spirit; you'll admit that."

"Yes, he's a good boy enough!" Uncle Gray grumblingly admitted, "if 't wa'n't for his one fault."

"That's nothing to be wondered at in a boy of his age. All boys are heedless. It aint because he's *my* nephew that I stand up for him," Aunt Gray continued; "I believe I should have just as much patience with him if he was yours; and I sometimes think you would have had considerable more."

"That's as unjust a fling as you ever made in your life, which is saying a good deal!" Uncle Gray exclaimed, resentfully. "I couldn't have borne with him more if he'd been my own son."

"I am glad you will have that thought to comfort you," she replied, in her cold, peculiar tone, which she could use with the most cutting effect. "Though I can't help wondering a little if you would really have stood by and seen a boy of your own go off, as Christopher did this morning, and not have called him back, even if you *had* been in a passion."

Another groan from Uncle Gray.

"I was in a passion; I'll own that. I was out of all manner of patience with the boy. But I supposed he would just go off, mebbe, an hour or two, lookin' for the hoss, and then come back, or, at least, go home to his mother's. He's probably there, abed and asleep, by this time—as we'd ought to be,

'stid of frettin' the blessed night away over what can't be helped."

"He wasn't back there at eight o'clock, so Abram said. And now, if you can sleep, not knowing what has become of him, or whether you'll ever see him again, all I can say is, I'm glad you've got so easy a conscience."

There was a silence of a few minutes, broken by Uncle Gray's restless sighing and turning; when suddenly Aunt Gray said, — "Hark !"

"What did you imagine you heard?" said Uncle Gray.

"A horse! And 't wasn't imagination at all; I hear him now! *It's Christopher!*" And Aunt Gray started up.

"Can't be!" said Uncle Gray, hoping she would contradict him. "No such good news as that!"

"It is! The horse has stopped at the barn. He'll find everything locked up."

She was up in a moment, lighting a lamp, which soon cast its kindling beams, like a rising orb, across the shining planet of her bald head (the false hair lay on the bureau); then, with a garment thrown loosely over her shoulders, she hastened to undo the back door.

Somebody was there before her. She slipped

back the bolt and looked out. A boy, in a base-ball cap, stood in the moonlight, with one foot on the step. It took her a moment to recognize him (she had never before seen him in that cap); then she exclaimed:—

“Christopher! you have come!”

“Yes, aunt,” said Kit. “And I want the key to the stable.”

CHAPTER IX.

“THE BEATERMOST DUNDERPATE.”

WHEN Kit, after his day's tramp, and his long night ride, dismounted in his uncle's yard, he could with difficulty stand upon his feet. He felt as if the body they bore belonged to somebody else, and that it weighed a ton. He was so stiff and lame that when he had lifted one leg up over the doorstep, he could hardly lift the other.

It was then and there he was met by Aunt Gray, whose second question was uttered with joyful eagerness as she peered out at him from the kitchen door,—

“You have brought back Dandy?”

“I have brought back Dandy,” Kit replied, with quiet exultation.

She was asking more questions, fumbling for the key on the door-post with one hand, while with the other she held together, across her ample bosom, the loose covering she had thrown on, — when a loud voice was heard, proceeding from the bedroom she had just left. It was Uncle Gray, calling out exci-

tedly to know if the comer was indeed Kit, and if he had really found Dandy.

"He won't believe it till he sees you and hears your story," said Aunt Gray.

"I'll slip Dandy into the stable ; then I'll come in and tell how it all happened," said Kit.

Elated by his aunt's surprise and joy over the success of his expedition, he took the key she gave him, and went limping vigorously to the stable, the door of which he threw open, leaving the reins on the horse's neck, and waiting for him to walk in.

"Come, Dandy, are you rusty in the hinges, too ? Or don't you know your own stable when you come to it at this time o' night. Well, you're a stupid Dandy, I should say ! Asleep ?"

And taking the horse by the bridle he led him into the dark stall. The mare in the stall beyond gave a whinny of welcome, but got no whinny in response from Dandy Jim.

Kit left the animal to stand with saddle and bridle on, while he went in to speak with his uncle and get a lantern.

"Wal, f'r instance ! you've done it, Christopher !" said Uncle Gray, half dressed, slipping his suspenders up on his shoulders as Kit entered the room,

where the lamp was burning on the bureau. "How *did* you manage it?"

"I got on the trail, and stuck to it; and when I lost it I looked till I found it again," said Kit. "For I wasn't going to come back without the horse."

"You mustn't take what I said too much to heart," replied his uncle. "I spoke too hasty, and I didn't really mean what I said. Though the truth is, you had tried me dreadfully with your heedlessness; and when I found you'd left the stable door unlocked, and Dandy was stole in consequence, that was the feather that broke the camel's back."

"I don't blame you a bit," said Kit, with earnest frankness.

"Well, I'm rej'iced to hear you say that. And it's all right now you've brought Dandy back. Where — how did you find him?"

"At the cattle-show, over in Peaceville. I traced him there, and found him in a shed. There was nobody with him at the time, and I just took him and rode him home."

"Wal, you was smart, I must say! And you didn't git holt of the thief?"

"No, he was in the crowd, watching the races, I suppose. I should have been glad enough to catch him if I had had time, and been sure of doing it.

But it was growing dark, and I thought Dandy was of the first importance."

"That's right, that's right," said Uncle Gray, approvingly. "You've been smart for once. Think of the fellow's surprise, comin' back, to find the hoss he had taken had been taken from him! A boy so, I don't know as you could 'a' done any better."

"All I was afraid of was that he had already sold Dandy to some one else," said Kit, glad to free his mind of the only doubts he felt regarding the transaction.

"I see," said Uncle Gray; "but you couldn't well help that. The hoss is mine, and you had a right to take him, no matter whose hands he had fell into. You've brought him back, and that's the main thing."

The worthy man chuckled with pleasure, so well satisfied with the said "main thing" that he couldn't think of criticising any part of Kit's conduct.

"I don't know that I should have got off so well, if it hadn't been for Cassius Brunlow," said Kit.

"That fellow!" said Uncle Gray. "Have you seen him?"

Kit explained briefly.

"Wal, f'r instance! I'm glad to know of his doing anybody a good turn. He owed it to you, for your

pa's sake, if he did to anybody. Your pa befriended him, and tried to make something of him, long after most folks had given him up as a bad egg. I don't know but he give ye good advice, under the circumstances; but I hope he'll find out who went to claim the hoss, and let us know. Brought him home in good condition, have ye?"

"I think so," said Kit. "You needn't put on your boots; I can attend to him. He's been watered. He won't need anything but hay to-night, will he?"

"Mabbe not. I'll go out and see how he looks, after he's cooled off a little; and see to lockin' up the barn agin," added Uncle Gray.

Meanwhile, Aunt Gray had lighted the lantern for her nephew, and left it waiting on a chair, while she placed a little supper for him on the kitchen table.

"I'll go out and give Dandy some hay, and bed him down, before I eat anything," he said, "and see if I can't shut up the barn myself, for once, without leaving the key in the door."

He could afford to speak cheerfully now of his blunder of the previous night.

"There's no need of uncle's going out at all," he added, stepping with the lantern into the moonlit space between house and barn.

The stable door was in shadow; but the lantern

lighted it up, and threw its glimmer into the stalls beyond. In the farther one the mare, putting her nose around the edge of the partition over the manger, to sniff at her neighbor, just then gave a vicious squeal.

"What's the matter with the vixen?" said Kit. "She's the only creature on the premises that isn't glad to see you back again, old Dandy Jim!"

He hung his lantern on a hook designed for it, where it would partly light both barn and stalls. Then he went up into the loft and threw down some hay into Dandy's rack. Finally he came around, and slapped the sedate nag in a friendly way before removing his bit.

"I'm pretty well, thank you; how are you, old boy?" he said, slipping the bridle off and the halter on, to the momentary annoyance of the animal, already nipping at the hay. "Seems to me you appear kind of strange!" he added, as he unbuckled the girt.

He took off the saddle and hung it in its place, and scattered straw for Dandy's bed. Then he brought the lantern and held it where he could look the horse carefully over and see what it was that did not appear just right about him.

Suddenly the solid globe seemed sinking away

from beneath the feet of Master Christopher. He started back, then bent forward again with a cry of consternation freezing his soul.

"Oh, my life! Oh, my life!" he moaned in a tremor of wild terror and dismay, which would have made even an enemy pity him.

Still, a faint, ghastly hope struggled against his fear. It must be the long day's jaunt which had somehow wrought an astounding change in the horse. Kit looked more closely at his sides, where no mottles were to be seen; but that might be owing to the imperfect light. He pulled down his head, and held, with shaking hand, the lantern to his forelock, which had not the least appearance of ever having been braided; but it was just possible the night dews had straightened the crinkled locks.

Lastly he lifted one foot after another, and found him shod before and behind.

With horrible sickness of heart he leaned back against the side of the stable and tried to gather his wits together,—tried to remember how the mistake had happened, and think what was now to be done.

But to his scattered wits there was only one thing sure:—

The horse he had brought home was not Dandy Jim.

CHAPTER X.

“AN UNCONSCIONABLE SCRAPE.”

UNCLE GRAY did not suppose there was any special need of his going out of the house again that night ; for he did not doubt but Kit, after the severe lesson he had received, could be trusted to put up the horse and lock the barn door.

“I don’t know but it’ll be a good thing it has happened, on the whole,” he said to Aunt Gray ; “for I guess it’ll learn him to have his wits about him in futur’.”

He was in excellent spirits, pulling on his boots. But he was wheezing a little ; and she urged him to go to bed again, predicting that he would be asthmatic to-morrow.

“I guess I sha’n’t be,” he said. “I don’t feel like sleep. I want to see how Dandy looks, after his scrape. I can’t help laughin’ when I think on’t ! How smart Christopher was !”

He glanced at the table as he passed through the kitchen.

“Ye might give him a little of that new honey

for his supper," he said, taking his hat from its peg. "I shouldn't wonder if 't would taste good, with his bread and butter."

The small corner of his heart filled by the nephew glowed with uncommon warmth that night.

"I guess I will," said Aunt Gray, innocently.

The truth is, she was all the while intending that Kit should have some of that honey, and was only waiting for her husband to get back to bed before setting it on the table. Perhaps she dreaded more his unpleasant remarks at sight of it than his asthmatic troubles on the morrow. For the honey represented so much cash; and Uncle Gray, besides being even more economical than Aunt Gray (which is saying much), often thought her inclined to over-indulgence of her nephew.

"Might give him a little," he added, recalling, the moment he had spoken, that genial fault of hers, together with the present high price of honey.

He even waited to see her bring a small cake of the pellucid comb in a sauce-dish, before putting on his hat and going out. He considered it a pretty liberal quantity. How he would have regarded it if he had gone first to the barn and learned of Kit's last stupendous blunder, it is needless to surmise.

He was to find that out soon enough.

"F'r instance!" he exclaimed, gleefully, entering the stable; "if anybody had told me this mornin',—"

He got so far when suddenly he stopped.

Kit had set the lantern on the floor, and was standing beside it,—if such an attitude can be called standing,—looking so shrunken, so weak and woe-begone, that you would almost have said he had shared the fate of Dandy, and been changed to another boy by some dreadful hocus-pocus. He was trying to rally himself when Uncle Gray, after an amazed glance at the horse, burst forth with:—

"What—what sort of a beast have you got here?"

"I don't know!" murmured the dazed victim of disaster.

"Don't know!" ejaculated Uncle Gray, in a swollen and agitated voice, which may be compared to a cat, with tail and fur up at some horrible circumstance. "Where's Dandy?"

"Don't know!" faltered the child of misery.

"What *do* you know?" roared Uncle Gray.

"I know I'm a fool, and that's about all!" said the abject slave of shame and misfortune.

With lips tightly rolled together, features in a terrible snarl, and eyes scintillating like small fireworks each side of the sallow, hooked nose, Uncle

Gray took up the lantern, and looked the strange horse over from forelock to fetlocks, from hock to withers. Then he set the lantern down again without a word, and took two or three strides to and fro, Kit all the while shrivelling among the pendent harnesses, and the horse tranquilly munching hay with stolid equine unconsciousness of the little drama in which he was so important a figure.

After a brief silence, broken by the regular champing sound in the manger, and Uncle Gray's irregular chafing and fuming, that worthy man, suppressing the inward turmoil to which no words could do justice, demanded sharply :—

“Where'd you git that hoss?”

“Over at the cattle-show,” Kit answered, meekly.

“But you said you found Dandy!”

“I did find him! I left him a minute to get a lunch, and went back to take him,—I hadn't a doubt but what I had the same horse,—and, now I've got him home, he's another horse altogether!”

“Another hoss altogether!” Uncle Gray repeated, trembling with the tempest he could hardly contain. “I should say! I don't believe you found Dandy at all!”

“Yes, I did; though I don't wonder you think so,” said Kit. “But it was dark under the shed,—

and Cash Brunlow tumbled me on his back in such a hurry,—and I never was on Dandy's back but twice,—and how could I tell another horse from him then, in the evening? Though it seemed to me there was something wrong about him, two or three times."

"Somethin' wrong about him!" echoed Uncle Gray. "This hoss is no more like Dandy than I be like Isaiah the Prophet! He's about the same size, and somethin' nigh the same color, and that's about all. He carries his head different."

"I noticed that, when I got off his back," said Kit. "I couldn't tell just how he did carry his head when I was riding him."

"He's a trimmer built hoss," continued Uncle Gray. "Longer-legged, a gre't sight! Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see now!"

"And a younger hoss, I should say; and he'd ought to be a better roadster."

"I *was* surprised," said Kit, "at his travelling off so well after his day's work. But I supposed it was because he was going home."

"Goin' home!" exclaimed Uncle Gray. "I wonder where his home is! Do you know what you've done, boy?"

Poor Kit answered only by his looks, which showed plainly enough his consciousness of the enormity of his offence.

"You've stole a hoss; that's what you've done!" said Uncle Gray. "Gi'n up Dandy, after findin' him,—if it's true you *did* find him, which I very much doubt,—and run off another man's hoss in his place. What's a-gun to be done about it?—have ye any idee?"

"I wish I had!" murmured the wretched Christopher.

"Wish ye had!" cried Uncle Gray. "If you don't beat all the—"

Words failing him to express his sense of the situation, he ended with a wrathful sniff.

"I don't see as anything can be done about it to-night," said he; "and we may as well lock up and go into the house. Must be nigh on to midnight, by this time. Smart boy, you be, keepin' us all awake till this time o' night, just to see how big a blunder a boy of your age and inches can possibly commit! I knew before, you was the beater most dunderpate in all creation! What shall I say now?"

"Say anything you please," replied Christopher, "his heart having sunk until it reached the bed-rock

of self-abasement and despair. "You can't blame me any more than I blame myself."

His utter submissiveness seemed slightly to mollify the uncle, whom anything like excuses or prevarications would have served but to exasperate the more.

"Wal, wal! le' 's go in. Can't nothin' be done till to-morrer; then we'll see how your amazin' stupidity can be remedied, if there's any remedy for 't, at all."

Uncle Gray held up the lantern, and scrutinized the strange animal again, before parting with him for the night.

"He's a better hoss'n Dandy; a younger and more valoooble hoss. I shouldn't object to the trade if 't was an honest one. But to go and steal another man's beast because one o' our'n 's been stole, is a kind of irreggelarty 't a law and order abidin' community aint likely to tolerate."

"I should suppose so!" said Kit, finding a certain strength in the very depth of humbleness he had sounded; for in that depth was truth, the source of all moral strength. "I don't tolerate it myself; as I'll show you to-morrow."

"You'll show!" said Uncle Gray, contemptuously. "What'll you do?"



W.A. Rogers

"I don't know just what," replied Kit. "But I'll let folks know that if I am a thief, I am an unwilling thief; and that if I've stolen a horse, I didn't mean it for stealing. I can do that at least."

"Come, come!" Uncle Gray turned to go. "No use standin' here and talkin' of what you'll show, and you'll let folks know. You've got yourself and us into an unconscionable scrape, and I don't see how we're a-gun to git out on't; though mabbe you do, you're so bright! Le' 's go in and tell your aunt, and see how proud she'll be of her smart nephew!"

He locked up the barn with one hand, while he held the lantern with the other; poor Kit feeling that he was unworthy to offer the least assistance.

Aunt Gray was quite as much astonished as that excellent man, her husband, had been, on learning the net result of Kit's arduous all-day's expedition. But she was more inclined to take his part; and she was the first to offer a probable explanation of his most extraordinary mistake.

"It's all a trick of that miser'ble, mean, despicable Cassius Brunlow," she declared. "He's equal to any low trick, and I'm sorry enough, Christopher, you had anything to do with him."

"So am I!" cried Uncle Gray. "And I'm aston-

ished, I'm astonished, boy ! you should have trusted him for a moment."

Kit, worn and haggard, sitting at table, trying to eat his supper, did not see fit to remind his uncle of some very different observations he had heard a little while before on the same subject, when it was thought Dandy had been secured partly through Mr. Brunlow's management.

"And it's my opinion," cried Aunt Gray, nodding her big bald head to give emphasis to her words, as she stood, still in dishabille, portly and grim at the end of the table,—"it's my positive opinion Cash Brunlow is the thief !"

"No doubt on't !" exclaimed Uncle Gray. "How could you — how could you for an instant believe he meant any good to you, with his advice and help?—a notorious scamp like him !"

And, standing at the other end of the table, he scowled his blackest disapprobation upon the culprit, actually at that moment tasting the precious honey !

Unconsciously tasting, it must be said. Kit knew no more that honey was in his spoon and that the spoon went to his mouth than if he had been an automaton. He was thinking ; and as he thought, the blood rushed to his cheeks and brow.

For he remembered just then how he had stood

looking squarely into Brunlow's face and described the thief to him,—sallow complexion, smooth face, suit of dark checked goods, narrow-brimmed straw hat, medium height,—without noticing that Brunlow's own appearance corresponded, item for item, with the description, which he checked off, with so innocent an air, on his fingers!

CHAPTER XI.

A ROGUE'S STRATEGY.

WE have already heard how Mr. Cassius Brunlow, when weary of the work-shop, had sometimes taken to the road as a travelling tinker. But he was never long satisfied even with that light and varied occupation; for though the experiences it yielded were large, the revenues were small; and it was a necessity of his restless nature that he must not only see the world, but also be well fed and entertained.

Hence a habit he had fallen into of supplementing his kettle-mending, and soldering of tin pans, with a little industry of a less praiseworthy sort. If he stopped the leak in your boiler, you were apt to find that he had made a more serious leak in your household economies by pocketing a silver fork or a tea-bell. Discovering your losses after he was gone, you resolved to look out for him when he should come that way again; but he did not soon come that way again. The country is large, and Mr. C. Brunlow distributed his favors over a large area of its territory. He was travelling over familiar ground

when he chanced upon Uncle Gray's unlocked stable. It was unaccustomed booty he got there; and though he knew of places where he could dispose of odd household articles to advantage, he was not an adept in the ways of converting horse-flesh into money.

He congratulated himself, however, on having mastered a new and important branch of his craft, when he found at the cattle-show a broad-backed farmer who agreed to purchase the stolen Dandy for seventy dollars. But the buyer had not the money in pocket, and must go out and raise it by borrowing or collecting bills. He had come to the fair in an open buggy, and he drove off in it, promising to return at sunset, or a little later, pay the money, and receive the horse, which he was to lead home at the tail of his wagon.

The seller might have accompanied him, but he did not do so, for two or three reasons: he was tired of riding, for one thing; for another, he did not care to be showing his stolen beast about town unnecessarily; last, if not least, he was by no means sure his man would raise the needful money, and, while waiting for him, he might see a chance to sell Dandy to somebody else, perhaps for a larger sum.

He had not been able to effect a second bargain;

and, falling back upon the first, he was amusing himself, in the absence of his customer, by trying his luck with the ball and peg, when accosted by his old acquaintance, Kit.

That made an embarrassing situation for Brunlow. With the stolen horse, the boy in search of him, and the purchaser who might return at any moment to claim him, the rogue found himself confronted by such a problem as the man in the riddle had to solve, with his fox and goose and corn. But he was equal to it.

His first movement was to divert Kit's attention from the cattle-pens, and at the same time separate himself from him so as to be free to play with his other victim, in case of his re-appearance. He might possibly complete his trade at the shed, secure his money, and get away in the crowd, leaving the two claimants of the horse to meet afterwards. But Kit's discovery of Dandy spoiled that game.

Then for a minute or two Brunlow gave up the horse as lost, and thought only of his own escape from suspicion. To insure that, it was necessary to get Kit and Dandy out of the way as quickly as possible, before the broad-backed farmer's return. It was an after-thought to take advantage of the gathering darkness, the position of the sheds, and Kit's youth

and inexperience, in order to hustle him off at last in great haste with the wrong horse.

In playing that trick, Mr. Brunlow was aware of running a risk ; but he was accustomed to risks. If the purchaser of Dandy or the owner of the other animal had come up at this critical moment, the trick would have failed, with some danger to the player. But they kept away, and it succeeded.

Simply enough. There was a row of pens all very much alike, with horses in four or five of them. In the pen next to Dandy's, on the right, was a horse so nearly like him that Brunlow himself had at one time been misled by the resemblance, and offered to sell him to a stranger. It was this little mistake of his own that suggested to his cunning mind the stupendous blunder which he finally caused Kit to commit.

The broad-backed farmer, in trying the paces of the horse he was buying, had left his saddle and bridle hanging on the boards dividing that pen from the next. The top bar leading into Dandy's shed had been let down by Kit himself ; but no sooner had he started for the refreshment stand, than it was put up again by Brunlow, as he stepped into the pen. Then, when Kit returned with his crackers and pie, he found the bars of the next shed down, and the

saddle and bridle on the wrong horse, which he mounted and rode off in the way we have seen.

If the manœuvre had failed, Brunlow would have been at no loss to explain away his own part in it. "What!" he would have exclaimed, "have I been such an idiot as to put your saddle on another man's horse?" The words were ready at his lips; but Kit, unluckily, gave him no occasion to use them.

"Oh, yes, indeed! I'll spot the thief! I shall be sure to know him!" he chuckled, rubbing his fingers gleefully, as he saw Kit disappear under the great ox-yoke of the entrance without having detected the juggle. "Narrow-brimmed straw hat, medium height — Great Grimes! what a joke!"

A joke truly, from his point of view; Dandy left in the shed, and the thief in sole possession!

He was well aware, however, that his game was not yet completely won. On the breaking-up of the crowd at the race-course, he saw a number of persons hastening towards him across the fair-ground.

"Here comes the owner of that horse, I'll bet a billion dollars!" he said to himself. But instead of guiltily trying to avoid them, he advanced with the most perfect assurance to meet the foremost of the comers.

"Did you notice anybody going out from here with

a saddled horse?" he asked, assuming a countenance of great concern.

They had not noticed any one particularly, they said, to his apparent disappointment and immense secret delight.

"Or have you seen anything of a stray saddle and bridle?" he inquired. "I left mine hanging on the side of the pen, by my horse here, and they're gone! A horse that was in the next pen is gone, too; and I'm afraid the owner made free with my property."

The persons he addressed were in such haste to hitch up their own horses and start for home that they gave little heed to his story, until one called out, from the let-down bars of the vacant shed:—

"Boys! *our* horse is gone!"

Then followed excited ejaculations, and a brisk running to and fro to examine adjacent sheds. Those who found their animals and other property safe were still intent on getting off; but there were three stout boys who took a sudden and lively interest in what Brunlow had to say.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BENTING BOYS.

THEY were the Benting boys, of Duckford ; Lon and Tom and Charley. They had driven over, seven miles, with their younger sister, Elsie, to visit the county fair ; and had been so fascinated by the races, in which a promising colt they knew was winning his first honors, that they were unexpectedly late in starting for home.

It was their horse that was missing ; and the eagerness with which they turned to Brunlow, now that their own interests appeared involved in the case they had no time to consider before, would have made a cynic smile.

Brunlow would have smiled — he would have laughed maliciously — but for the necessity of keeping a sober face. Good fellows they were, no doubt ; yet how little they cared for his lost saddle and bridle, until they learned whose horse had gone with them !

They had been chatting in low, hurried tones of the triumphs of their friend's colt, and of the lateness

of their start, — wondering what the folks at home would think, and if the cows would get milked in their absence, — when that startling discovery put everything else out of their boyish heads.

The girl had stopped at the wagon, in which lay the loosely flung harness ; but now she, too, advanced, in no little consternation, to the pens where Tom and Charley were questioning Brunlow.

“How long had you been here when we came?” they demanded’.

“Just long enough to find my saddle and bridle missing”; and Cassius showed where they had hung. “It’s a wonder the fellow didn’t take my horse ; lucky for me he preferred yours !”

“Why don’t you harness this horse to our wagon and start after him as soon as you can?” Elsie said to her brothers, who proposed the plan to Brunlow.

“Go along with us,” said Tom ; “and get your saddle when we get back our horse.”

For the real thief to set off with these honest young men, driving the horse that had really been stolen, in pursuit of Kit, who was no thief at all, and the horse he had taken by mistake, struck Cassius as a funny arrangement. But it was one he might find growing serious, in case Kit should be overhauled.

"I might do it," he said, "if this horse was mine."

"You called him yours," said Tom.

"So I did; and I'm responsible for him. I sold him to a man this afternoon, and he went off to get the money to pay for him. He was to meet me again over by the refreshment tent; but I got tired of waiting, and — great Grimes!" Brunlow suddenly burst forth, apparently in vexed surprise, "have I been duped?"

"How duped?" Tom Benting asked.

"I believe he's the rogue! the man who was wanting to buy my horse! That was only a pretence; he was just looking for a chance to steal one! Oh, aint I soft?"

The unsophisticated Cassius whipped his trousers with the backs of his fingers, and scowled with prodigious self-disgust.

"Somebody hang me on a tree, somewhere, to ripen," he exclaimed; "I am so jolly green!"

As nobody volunteered to do him that favor, he continued, in his immature and verdant state, to rail upon other people's roguery and his own transparent innocence.

The boys now urged again the plan they had proposed; to which it seemed that he could have no

longer any objection, if the man he awaited was indeed a cheat. But Cassius held off.

"If mine was a fast horse, and we knew just which way the fellow had gone, it might pay," he said. "But that was an old saddle, not worth taking much trouble to find, anyway; and to start off at this time of day, to hunt you don't know where, for you don't know who—I don't just fancy!"

Meanwhile, the oldest of the boys had been making inquiries for the lost horse at the entrance; and he now came back, declaring that he believed he had heard from him.

"A little fellow in a white cap rode out on just such a horse, not ten minutes ago. We must follow him up!"

"How can we?" asked Charley.

"On foot, if no other way," said Lon, resolutely. "Elsie! I've got a chance for you to ride with the Rawdons. Get home as soon as you can, and tell the folks what has happened, so they needn't be surprised if they don't see us before midnight."

He was a sturdy, energetic youth, and his determined voice and manner put new life into the younger boys. They told him of their plan of using Brunlow's horse, and Brunlow's objection to it.

"You don't care for your bridle and saddle!" said he to that reluctant young man; "nor very much for helping other folks in trouble, I suppose."

"Oh, yes!" said Brunlow, smiling blandly. "That's my weakness. I shouldn't be here if I hadn't lent a man a hundred dollars, just to accommodate him, and been obliged to take this horse for the debt."

"Well, then," said Lon, "accommodate us! If we don't get your saddle and bridle for you, I'll engage to pay you for your trouble, and give you supper and lodging, in any case. What do you say? Yes, or no! We've no time to lose!"

Cassius was beginning to look upon this as a promising adventure,—trusting his ready wit to do more to hinder than to help the pursuit of Kit, if he joined in it, and to get himself out of difficulty, if it should prove too successful. Here might, also, be an opening for another sale of Dandy, if the one already arranged had failed, as he feared.

Moreover, he was in need of ready money, and, unless he could raise some, he did not see just what he was to do with himself and Dandy for the night.

"Well, as you say; anything to accommodate!" he finally replied to Lon's proposal. And the harness went on Dandy's back in a hurry.

Tom was putting Elsie into their neighbor Rawdon's wagon, when she said to him :—

"I hope you will find General! But I don't believe in that man very much ; do you?"

"He seems a clever sort of fellow," Tom replied.

Though hardly sixteen years old, she was much brighter than her big brothers, in some respects. She had watched Brunlow closely, and detected in his plausible speech a tone of insincerity.

"There's something about him I don't like," she said. "I'm afraid he is fooling you."

"He can't fool us very much," Tom answered, confidently. "Three to one!"

"That is true ; but look out for him," were Elsie's parting words as she rode off with the Rawdons.

How much cause the brothers might have had to remember her warning, if their plan had been carried out, cannot be told ; for it was defeated by a circumstance as vexatious to themselves as it was agreeable to Brunlow.

Dandy was harnessed to the Benting wagon, and Brunlow had mounted to the front seat with Lon, while Tom and Charley sat behind. They were driving out of the almost deserted fair-ground, into the evening atmosphere of dew and dust that hung low over the skirts of the village ; Lon looking

eagerly for a policeman he had left to learn the direction the little rider in the white cap had taken, while Brunlow argued that the man who had the Benting horse wore a black hat, and was by no means little ; when all at once he called out : —

“ I’m wrong ! there’s my man, after all ! ”

It was indeed the purchaser of Dandy, coming to keep his agreement.

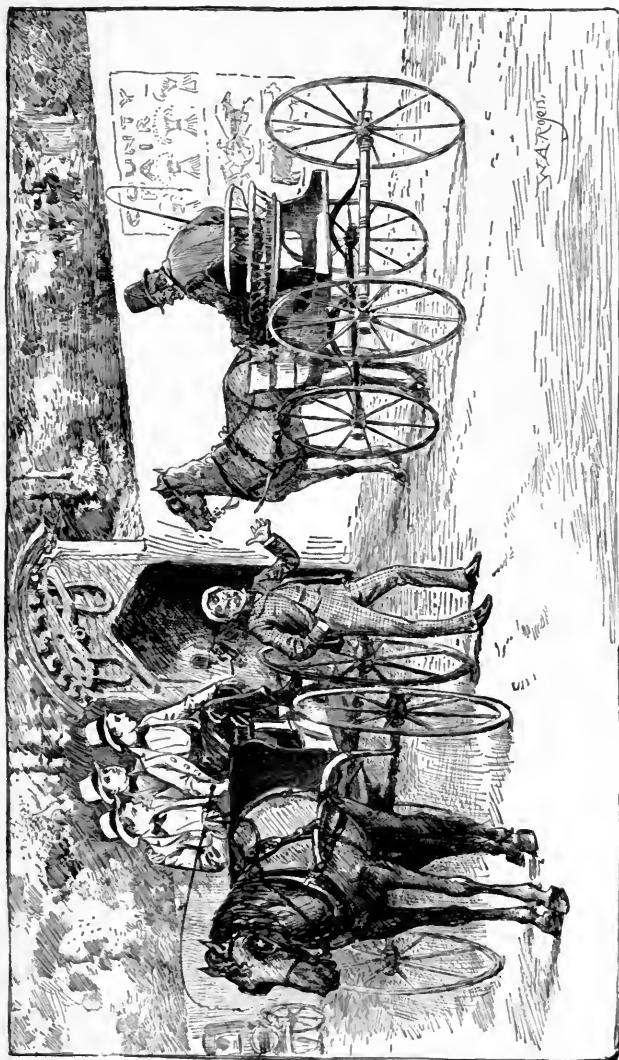
“ I had given you up,” said Cassius, as they met. “ Where have you been all this time ? ”

“ I had more trouble gettin’ the money than I expected ; but I have got it,” said the man, reining up in his buggy. “ Not too late, I hope ! ” looking sharply at the harnessed horse.

“ No ; a bargain’s a bargain,” said Brunlow, with more satisfaction than he dared to show. “ I can give you possession on the spot.”

The Benting boys explained their situation, and begged permission to drive the horse, at least until they could hire another. But the buyer of Dandy was by no means so obliging a person as Brunlow. He was a square-jawed, broad-shouldered, short-necked man, with a short, grizzled beard, and a way of saying, “ No ! ” and “ I can’t ! ” which proved extremely discouraging to the Bentings.

“ I’m in a hurry to get home,” he said. “ I don’t



"There's my man, after all!" Page 114.



care for the saddle ; I wouldn't buy it, and I won't go a rod out of my way for it. Sorry to interfere with your plans, gentlemen ; but that hoss belongs to me, and your harness must come off."

"If you say so," replied Lon, seeing the sort of man they had to deal with, "off it comes!"

Dandy was stripped immediately, and furnished with a rope halter, by which he was to be led at the tail of the buggy, the harness being thrown again into the Benting wagon, and the wagon left standing helplessly beside the street.

"This is a pretty predicament for us, boys!" Lon exclaimed, with much repressed wrath. But there was no help for it ; the unaccommodating man must have his way.

"I'm awfully sorry it has happened so," remarked the inwardly rejoicing Cassius. "I'd stay and help you ; but I must go with this man over to the store yonder, and get my money, and give him a bill of sale."

Leaving the brothers to get out of their difficulty as best they could, he mounted the buggy beside the broad-shouldered driver, calling back cheerfully as he pulled Dandy by the halter and rode away :—

"It must be the little chap in the white cap tha got your horse, after all!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RETURN TRIP.

LATE to bed that night, the harassed and weary Christopher slept until a late hour the next morning ; Aunt Gray thinking it best he should not be called.

“Let him sleep when he can,” said that large-proportioned lady, adjusting her false hair and cap for the day. “He has trouble enough before him !”

“He, trouble ! What do you think of *me* ?” said Uncle Gray, wheezing horribly, with asthma, over a narcotic weed he was burning in a saucer. “But let him sleep ! I don’t want anything more of the services of a boy like that !” coughing in the smoke of his sacrifice. (He calculated that every time he burnt stramonium it was at a cost of two cents.) “I shouldn’t have this attack if it hadn’t been for —”

Wheeze ! cough ! A convulsion stopped his speech ; while the puffs of smoke, parted by the sharp promontory of the hooked nose, curled upward, past the craggy brow and thickets of stiff iron-gray

locks, filling the air with a bluish cloud and a pungent odor.

It must have been the odor which finally awakened Kit in his attic. He knew it meant asthma, or "azmy," as the old folks termed it; and he started up instantly with a guilty consciousness of his situation. Uncle Gray was always crabbed and exacting, as short of temper as short of breath, even on ordinary occasions of his attack; what, then, must he be after such a night as Kit had caused him to pass?

With sickening recollections of the strange horse in the barn, and misgivings as to the time of day, the boy got up, and, with gasps and tremors of anxiety, began to put on his clothes. He felt that he was an outcast wretch, no longer of any account in the household; not suspecting that it was partly owing to his aunt's kindness that he had not been called.

He was surprised at her gentle manner toward him when he appeared in the kitchen; she told him kindly to sit down at his breakfast, and took it from the oven where she had been keeping it warm.

"Abram has done the chores," she said, — a piece of news which did not much tend to lighten the weight of condemnation under which he felt himself bowed to the dust. The day was dull and foggy,

and it was even later than he had surmised. "Your uncle aint well this morning."

"I smelt the smoke," Kit murmured, miserably. "It's all owing to last night, I suppose."

"Part to that, I guess, and part to the change in the weather. Mental troubles is often wus for him than a damp air. But eat your breakfast, and don't worry," said Aunt Gray.

"I can't help worrying," said Kit, with starting tears at her kind words.

He had little appetite, yet he felt that he must eat for strength in the day's business before him. He must go and look at that horse first, however,—a duty from which he shrank. It did not seem to him that he could ever look at a horse again without qualms.

He went out heroically, however, and re-examined the beast by daylight, wondering more and more at himself for having mistaken him, even in his haste and in the dusk, for Dandy Jim. He watered and fed him, reviewing at the same time all the circumstances of the evening before, and then returned to the house, fully resolved what he was to do.

"Can I see uncle?" he asked, after forcing himself to eat the breakfast awaiting him.

"I'm afraid 't won't be any gre't satisfaction

to you," Aunt Gray replied, "but you can see him."

Kit knocked timidly at the bedroom door, and a gruff "Come in!" ushered him into a room full of smoke, in the midst of which sat his uncle at a light-stand, burning his weed again, with his nose over the saucer.

"Wal, f'r instance!" growled the old gentleman, barely giving him a glance through the thick cloud. "What do you think of yourself this mornin'?"

His voice ended in a cough, which tapered to a wheeze, made as deep and long-drawn and distressing as possible, in order to show Kit what suffering he had caused his poor old phthisicky uncle.

Kit made no direct reply to the question, but said humbly:—

"I suppose that horse has got to go back."

"Go back! Of course he has got to go back. I wish he hadn't! I want a hoss to help draw—"

Here followed such a tremendous see-sawing of the respiratory organs that Kit, wretched as he was, could not forbear the humorous fancy that Uncle Gray wanted a horse to help him draw his breath.

After a pause, filled with the uninteresting music of what seemed a stirred-up swarm of bees in his

chest, the old gentleman resumed, with a lively buzzing accompaniment :—

“I hoped the weather ’ud graj’ally clear up—so I could ventur’ out—hire a hoss, and drive over tu Peaceville—leadin’ the one you—” Here his words were quite lost for a moment in the tumult of the agitated hive—“and see what I could hear of Dandy.”

“It doesn’t look much like clearing up,” Kit suggested.

“No,” buzzed Uncle Gray, lowering his nasal hook into the smoking saucer.

“It won’t do to wait,” Kit went on. “I meant to have the horse half way back there by this time, and I should if I hadn’t overslept myself.”

“You !” whizzed the swarm of bees.

“Yes, sir,” said Kit, firmly. “I took the horse, and I ought to take him back. I can ride him, and maybe get Dandy yet.”

“Nonsense !” hummed the hive. “I wouldn’t trust you with—” the rest was a whistle.

“You needn’t trust me with anything,” said Kit, “unless it is a bridle. I can ride bareback, if you are afraid to let me have the saddle.”

The truth is, Uncle Gray had decided objections to letting the new horse go until the old one had

come. It seemed a pretty good swap, but for the slight irregularity attending it, and he had been studying how it could be reconciled to right and conscience. He see-sawed noisily for some time over the problem, with his nose in the smoke ; then, hearing Kit's hand on the latch, he snarled out,—

“Wal! it's a bad job! I s'pose the hoss has got to go. And I can't go with him, to-day, as I see!”

Kit did not wait to hear more, but took advantage of the convulsion which the effort caused his uncle, to open the door quickly, and shut it again after him, escaping at once from the smoke he disliked, and the interview, which was not, in a strict sense, delightful.

He had found the base-ball cap comfortable the day before ; it was at hand as he went out through the kitchen, and he put it on. Then he curried and bridled the new horse, and led him from the stable.

He did not mean to take the saddle, not knowing what he should do with it if he did not have Dandy to ride home, a happiness he could hardly hope for ; but he found himself so lame and sore when he came to mount, with only an old meal-bag between him and the equine backbone, that he readily listened to Aunt Gray's earnest counsel.

“If you must go,” she said, “don't think of riding

without the saddle. It's of no gre't account, anyway, if it never comes back."

She also made Kit take a little of her own month for necessary expenses ; and sent him off with her best wishes, and a strict charge not to "blunder into any more trouble."

The horse's walk was torture enough to him at first ; his trot was excruciating. But he forced himself to bear the exercise, and found his stiff joints limbering up to it before long.

He could not endure to have his mother see him, after the false good tidings he had brought her the night before ; so he took another street through the village, and was soon retracing, with rather less of joy and triumph in his soul, the course of his recent moonlight ride from Peaceville.

The horse was quite as free as he wished him to be at first. But as the soreness of his own limbs wore off, the animal's paces began to relax, and much clucking, and urging with heels and reins, at length became necessary.

The more he dreaded meeting the owner whose beast he had ridden off so unceremoniously, confessing his error, and suffering he knew not what reproaches and retribution, the more anxious Kit was to have it all over with ; his conscience, which was

strong, spurring his courage, which was by no means weak in serious things, timid and sensitive boy as he was.

He had made about half the distance when he stopped to water the horse at a wayside trough. Near by grew a walnut-tree, with boughs overhanging the pump, from the top of which he reached up and cut a stout twig, for use as a riding-whip in making the rest of the journey. Then, after stretching his legs a minute, he remounted, and went on at a quicker pace.

He had not gone far, however, when he discovered that he had, with his usual heedlessness, left his knife lying on the top of the pump. He was very much incensed with himself for falling into the same old fault after the lessons he had had; and hardly knew at first whether to suffer the loss of the knife or the pain and chagrin of riding back for it.

"It's a good half-mile," he said, looking back, — and miles were important to him just then. "If I was sure of coming this way with Dandy —"

But he felt heavily at his heart the uncertainty of his returning with Dandy that or any other way. He could not afford to lose so good a knife; and this was one that had been his father's.

"I'll go back!" he exclaimed, after a little reflec-

tion; "and then make up for lost time by riding faster."

It was the first knife he had ever been able to keep long in his possession; and he had even mislaid this two or three times. He resolved to recover it now, and then see if he could not carry it safely in his pocket at least as many months as his father had carried it years.

As he approached the trough, he noticed a light wagon coming down another road, which made into the one he was on, at a point not far beyond. It carried two lads, who, looking across at him, touched up their horse.

Something in the excited looks they gave him made Kit almost wish he had not returned for his knife. The roads converged rapidly; and when he reined up at the pump, the rattling wagon could not have been more than three or four rods away, if it had not already passed.

The faces in it looked back rather wildly at Kit; and as he turned about, after taking his knife from the pump, without dismounting, he saw with growing alarm that, instead of keeping the more direct road beyond the fork, the wagon made a short turn into the road he was on, and was coming toward him.

He endeavored to act like the innocent boy he was, and began to ride away again, as if nothing uncommon was happening. But as the wagon followed with increasing racket, he could not forbear trying his new whip, and striking into a pace that might have kept those too eager faces a while longer at a distance, but for a startling circumstance.

CHAPTER XIV.

KIT'S NEW ACQUAINTANCES.

BEHIND a low wall which bounded the upper side of the triangular field separating the forked roads, a sturdy youth was seen running. His parted lips and his crooked arms flying quickly back and forth in time with his vibrating legs, indicated strenuous effort. He had evidently left the wagon just before Kit sighted it, and struck across the lot in order to get behind him, while his companions whipped forward to head him off.

He was himself heading him off now, since Kit had turned back from the pump. He leaped over into the road, and made a rush at Kit's bridle-rein, while the wagon clattered close behind.

"What do you want of me?" Kit gasped out in some trepidation, no longer trying to escape.

"We'll show you what we want!" cried Lon, — for the seeming highwayman was no other than the eldest of the Benting boys.

He appeared very much excited, seizing Kit's leg

with one hand while he clung to the rein with the other.

"Get off your stolen horse!"

"Is this — your — horse?" inquired Kit.

"Rather!" said Lon, with wild glee. "Here, boys!"

Tom and Charley tumbled from the wagon; and Kit, half-paralyzed by the suddenness of the onset and the rude manner of his capture, was pulled to the ground before he fairly had time to dismount.

"Don't tie my hands!" he pleaded, as they whipped a halter out of the wagon and were proceeding to bind him with it in no gentle fashion. "I didn't steal him; I took him by mistake."

"Oh, yes!" said Lon, with gruff sarcasm. "No doubt!"

"That's what they all say," added Charley.

"Always a mistake!" exclaimed Tom.

"But it's so!" Kit insisted, with pale and trembling innocence, which appeared more like guilt to the elated Benting boys than guilt itself would probably have done. "I was taking him back to Peaceville."

"Of course!" said Lon.

"Which way is Peaceville?" cried Charley. "The way you were going when we first saw you,

or the way you went after we got in ahead of you?"

Then Kit saw how unfortunate had proved the blunder of leaving his knife and having to go back for it. But for that, he might have passed out of sight before he was descried by the boys from the other road, and returned the horse to his shed at the cattle-show, in a manner which would have left no doubt as to his honest intentions; or, if overtaken, he would, at least, have been found on his way thither. Who would believe his story now?

Not the Benting boys, evidently. They tied his hands behind him, and hustled him into the wagon, Tom and Charley guarding him, seated between their knees on the wagon-bottom, as if he had been some desperate character (poor Kit!), while Lon mounted the recovered horse and rode near, ready to lend assistance in case the horse-thief, slipping his bonds, should attempt to overpower them and get away.

They had traced the little rider in the white cap but a short distance out of Peaceville, the night before, and had been all the morning scouring the country roads for news of him. No news had they been able to get; but here was something better still — the horse and the little chap himself!

Passing the pump again and turning at the fork, they took the road by which they had come, talking hilariously of their good luck, and now and then questioning Kit, without, however, giving the least apparent credit to anything he had to say.

"Whose saddle and bridle are these?" Lon demanded, riding beside the wagon.

"They belong to my uncle," replied Kit.

"Uncle! Oh, yes!" Thinking of *my uncle* as a cant term for a pawnbroker, Lon added, sarcastically: "I've no doubt but what they would soon have belonged to him if you had got well off with them!"

"The horse I was after belongs to him, too," said Kit, from his ignominious seat on the wagon-bottom.

"No doubt of that, either!"

Lon did not have a bad heart, by any means; but he was young, and exhilarated by what seemed to him a great triumph, and he could not help showing his amused incredulity.

"Who was the other rogue in league with you when you stole this horse?"

"I tell you I didn't steal him," Kit insisted. "And there was nobody in league with me."

"No use of your saying that," Tom retorted. "He pretended somebody had stolen his saddle

and bridle; but we found afterward you and he had been seen together, and that he helped you get away with our horse. What do you say to that?"

"I say what I've been trying to say all along, only you wouldn't hear me!"

Once more Kit endeavored to make it plain that there was but one rogue in the transaction, and that Brunlow was he. But his protestations fell on unbelieving ears. The evidence they had gathered after Brunlow left them outside the fair-grounds, that he was an associate of the little chap in the white cap, appeared to the boys so conclusive that they only laughed at their prisoner's indignant denials.

"I hope you caught him!" exclaimed Kit.

"Of course, we caught him," replied Tom, who thought it right to answer falsehoods with falsehood. "And he owned up everything."

"If he owned up everything, he told you the only stolen horse was the one he stole from my uncle,—the one I meant to take when he hurried me off with yours. If he told you that, he told the truth; if anything different, he told you what was false."

Kit spoke passionately, with swelling heart and starting tears.

"He won't dare to say anything else to *my* face!" he added, struggling, in vain, to bring up one of his tied hands to his filling eyes. "Where is he now?"

"Don't say anything more to him," spoke up Lon, who did not altogether approve of Tom's fiction.

Yet he himself had one more question to ask.

"You've been expecting to meet your pal somewhere this morning, haven't you?"

"If you mean the horse-thief," replied Kit, "he's the last person I've expected to meet; he will keep as far away from me as he can! Bring us together; that's all I ask. And let me know what became of his stolen horse. Have you got that, too?"

"I can't tell you now," Lon replied, trying to give his words a dark significance. "You'll find out all you want to know, and may be a good deal more, when you are hauled up before the court. No more talk, boys; but come along!"

CHAPTER XV.

AT MAPLE PARK.

A RIDE of four or five miles brought the Bent-
ing boys and their captive in view of a small
maple-grove by the roadside, and a large white
farm-house gleaming behind the screen of foliage
and the colonnades of gray trunks.

The grove was in place of the common country
door-yard, and it was unfenced; a short driveway
among the trees led directly to the doors of the
house. One of these was open, and in it stood the
most radiant figure Kit had ever beheld.

All the morning had been dull and overcast; but
now the sunshine flashed through broken clouds,
lighting up the maples, variegated with the hues of
early autumn, the house-front half in shadow (it
stood a little back from the grove), and that figure
in the door.

Charley, the youngest of the brothers, had ex-
changed his seat in the wagon for Lon's in the
saddle, and he now rode forward under the trees,
swinging his hat, and shouting:—

“Good news! Good news, Elsie!”

This was, in fact, the home of the Bentings, which Elsie, with poetical, school-girl fancy, had named Maple Park. The figure in the door was Elsie herself, radiant with joy at sight of Charley on the recovered horse, and of the captive he pointed out, following with his brothers.

“Oh! you’ve got him, too?” she said. “So you have!” noticing the white cap, which had been much talked of as the distinguishing mark of the little rider last seen with the missing horse.

Rogue as they deemed him, the boys in the wagon had taken pity on Kit, in his painful posture on the bottom-boards, and got him up on the seat, between them, though they had not untied his hands. As they brought him to the door, Elsie’s countenance lost something of its radiance, though nothing of its beauty. She was really a very pretty, fresh-complexioned blonde. She had the brightest, sweetest eyes poor Kit had ever seen, and now at sight of him, dejected, bound, and blushing in her presence, they began to deepen with compassionate concern.

“Where’s father?” asked Lon, jumping from the wagon.

Mr. Benting had also been in quest of his horse

that morning, and finding, on his return home an hour before, that the boys had not been heard from, he had started off again.

"Mamma went with him the last time," said Elsie. "He was going to town to get notices in the papers, and offer a reward."

"That won't be necessary now," said Lon, proudly. "How soon can we get a bite to eat?"

When told that dinner would be ready in half an hour, he exclaimed:—

"Can't wait! Give us some bread and milk, cold meat, pie, and cheese; anything in the house! We are hungry as wolves, but we must be off again in five minutes."

Elsie could not keep her eyes away from the prisoner; her brow knitted with an expression of pity and dread, as she thought how young he was, and yet how wicked.

"Where are you going?" she inquired.

"To town, to get out a warrant, and give our horse-stealer over to the constable, the first thing."

"Must you?" murmured Elsie, with another intensely serious glance at Kit in the wagon.

"Of course, we must. What else can we do with him? So hurry up that grub! Charley," cried Lon, "put the other seat into the wagon; then

we can all ride in that, and leave General at home."

"Better take General along," suggested Charley. "We may need to put him into the evidence."

"Nonsense!" said Lon. "But if you'd like to ride him, all right. I was thinking of the saddle and bridle; they probably belong to somebody."

"You'll find they belong to somebody!" said Kit. "Talk about my stealing your horse! what are *you* doing?"

"Does he deny it?" Elsie whispered to Tom, in the entry.

"Of course he denies it! Do you expect he is going to own up, like a good boy! See what a surly, hang-dog look he has!"

"He doesn't look very amiable, to be sure," said Elsie. "I don't wonder he appears angry and ashamed! He has been crying, hasn't he?" seeing the streaks on Kit's face, where the dust of the road had settled on the tracks of tears he had been unable to wipe.

"Yes; he has cried, and pleaded, and told all sorts of stories, to make us let him off. But we don't go a-hunting such game every day in the year," said Tom; "do we, boys?"

"He must have been led into it by some older

person," Elsie declared. "I expected to see a hardened wretch, with a bad, wicked face ; and I never was more surprised ! If he hadn't been caught with the horse in his possession, I couldn't believe he had had a hand in stealing him !"

"Of course you couldn't !" said Tom, who had followed Elsie to the kitchen. "Girls don't know about such things, anyway. Now, see, what there is to eat."

He washed his soiled hands and dusty face at the sink ; while Elsie, with the aid of a stout serving-woman, set out a hasty luncheon in the large middle room of the farm-house.

Tom, having made an imperfect toilet, was going out to keep guard over the prisoner and let his brothers come in, when his eye rested on the table, where Elsie was placing knives and forks and plates.

"Are you going to eat with us ?" he asked.

"No, indeed !" she replied. "It is all I can think of doing to feed you."

"Then what is this for ?"

He pointed at a fourth plate, arranged, with its knife and fork, at a discreet distance from the other three, on the end of the large table.

"You will give him something, wont you ?" said Elsie.

"If we do, it will be in the wagon," said Tom. "Do you suppose we are going to sit at the same table with a horse-stealer?"

"I will put his plate on the kitchen table, if you object to his company," said Elsie. "I think you ought to let him get out of the wagon; he looks very tired, sitting there, with his hands tied!"

"Well! he'll have to sit there, with his hands tied, looking tired, till we take him to Judge Sweet," muttered Tom.

Elsie said no more, but quietly removed the objectionable plate to the kitchen table, where she had it placed, flanked with the knife and fork, when Lon came in.

He, too, noticed it, and frowned at her foolishness when told for whom it was designed. But he was older and more reasonable than Tom, and she had her little argument ready for him.

"Of course you will give him something to eat," she said. "You wouldn't wish to be cruel to him if he was the worst person in the world; and anybody can see he isn't that. He isn't so old as Charley; I don't believe he is much older than I am! How absurd, to keep him tied in the wagon there, as if you were afraid of him; afraid he will knock you all

down, I suppose, and get away from you — three great boys like my big brothers !”

Lon scowled again, but finally responded, rather ungraciously :—

“I’m not afraid ! I don’t care ; only it will waste a little time. We can just as well watch him in here as out there.”

Kit was accordingly brought into the kitchen ; where, seeing Elsie again, he bashfully begged for permission to wash himself at the sink, after Charley had got through with the basin.

“Of course you can !” cried Elsie, hastening to fill it with fresh water, while Lon reluctantly untied the prisoner’s hands.

As he could not very well eat with them tied again, Tom thought they ought, at least, to bind his legs, and perhaps make him fast to the chair he sat on at table. But Elsie treated this proposal with merry scorn.

“What are you three great boys thinking of ?” she whispered, behind Kit’s back, as he bent over the wash basin. “I believe *I* could keep him from running away, without help from either of you !”

“You don’t know anything about the tricks of these rogues,” replied Lon, who, however, relaxed his vigilance sufficiently to let the prisoner sit unlashd at



"Elsie could not keep her eyes away from the prisoner." Page 134.



the kitchen table, where the brothers could watch him through the open door, from their places in the next room. They were ready to start up and spring upon him at the first movement he might make to escape ; and Lon had a stout cane within reach.

Elsie went to and fro between the rooms, performing the office of table-girl with graceful alacrity ; but stood, at last, watching, with almost fascinated eyes, the captive as he ate, or tried to eat.

A little soap and water, and a careless brushing back of the hair from the forehead with his wet fingers, had wonderfully improved Kit's appearance. He had a full, fair brow, a good nose, a chin with an interesting dimple, and ruddy, brown cheeks, which were blushing again with uneasy consciousness of a pure girl's searching gaze. He kept his eyes downcast, but she could see that they were full of gentle expression ; and his sensitive lips were quivering in a way that excited her sympathy.

"You don't look like such a person !" she said, impulsively.

He forgot his bashfulness in a moment, and raised his eyes to her face with a look in which there was a gleam of proud defiance.

"Don't I ?" he said. "Well, I am about as much *such a person* as your brothers are brigands !"

CHAPTER XVI.

ELSIE AND THE CAPTIVE.

ELSIE BENTING was thrilled with something deeper than surprise by the expression of Kit's face and the tone of his voice.

"How can that be?" she asked.

"I took their horse," he said, "and now they have taken me. It's a mistake on both sides. I took the horse by mistake, and they have taken me by mistake, while I was on my way with him to Peaceville."

And his eyes beamed upon her with convincing candor.

"How could you ever make such a mistake as that?" she exclaimed, trying to remain incredulous, while her heart felt the earnest truthfulness which inspired such looks and tones.

"My uncle's horse had been stolen the night before, and I found him in one of the sheds at the cattle-show. I left a fellow to watch him—a scamp named Brunlow; I ought to have known better, but he used to work for my father, and he appeared so friendly I thought I could trust him. I went to get

something to eat, and when I came back he put me on the horse in the next shed, which he had saddled and bridled, instead of mine. It was pretty dark; both horses are of about the same color; and I rode off in such a hurry I never noticed the difference until I got home. I think now it was he who had stolen our horse, and that he played the trick, knowing just what sort of a blunderhead I am!"

"You a blunderhead?" said Elsie, with a smile at his eager, intelligent face.

He could not help smiling in return, rather ruefully, however.

"Don't what I tell you prove it? If you had put me on the race-course there yesterday, and picked out the champion blunderers of America to match me, I should have come out several lengths ahead. That's what my uncle thinks, at any rate; and no wonder!"

"The man you speak of must be the one who claimed you had stolen his saddle and bridle," said Elsie.

"Oh! the scoundrel!" exclaimed Kit. "Did he claim that?" And he described Brunlow's appearance.

"The very same!" said Elsie. "I knew he was a rogue, by the way he talked — so smooth and plausi-

ble! And my brothers were afterward convinced of it."

"I am glad he is caught!" said Kit.

"Caught?" said Elsie.

She had sat down in the chair opposite, and they were now conversing face to face, across the table.

"Your brothers said he was," replied Kit. "And they said he had owned up everything — as if he and I had been stealing horses together!"

"That's what they inferred; and it certainly looked as if you were in company with him," said Elsie. "But this is the first I have heard of his being caught."

"See here, Elsie!" called Tom, from the other room. When she appeared in the door-way, he beckoned her to come nearer, and whispered, "What are you talking with that fellow for? He's fibbing to you, every word he says."

"I am afraid somebody has been fibbing to him," she replied, with a quiet sparkle in her moist eyes. "You never told us at home here of that fellow's being caught."

"Of course, that's bosh," said Tom. "I thought I might frighten this one into owning up, if I told him the other one had."

"I don't believe he has anything more to own up

to than what he has been telling me," said Elsie. "You heard it?"

"Yes," Tom answered, carelessly; "and it's nothing new. He tried the story on us before; but when we catch a thief in the very act of riding off our horse, we are not to be fooled by any such pretence; are we, Lon?"

"Oh, you are not, are you?" she replied, with keen satire. "Who was fooled last night by the *other one*, as you call him? And who was the first to see through him?"

"Of course, you were right, in his case," Tom admitted.

"So am I right now," she averred. "I am just as sure this boy is honest as I was that that man was a rogue."

"He may be," said Lon, shoving his chair back from the table. "But his saying so don't make him so."

"His being so makes him so; and that's what I see," Elsie insisted, in a voice loud enough for Kit to hear in the next room. "Talk about his surly, hang-dog look, Tom! He has as open, honest a face as you have; and you can't wonder that he appeared a little surly, after your treatment of him. How would you look in his place, do you suppose? Not very angelic, I imagine."

"How could we treat him any differently?" Tom asked. "If you are going to take every rogue's explanation for gospel truth, when he is caught, few, I fancy, would be brought to justice."

"That's so!" said Charley.

"Come, boys," said Lon, not deeming it worth while to argue the matter further. "You never can tell anything by what a rogue says. There's only one thing you can rely upon; and that's evidence. If his story is true, he'll have a chance to prove it."

He had risen from the table; his brothers followed his example.

"I've no doubt but he will be able to prove it," Elsie persisted in saying. "But think what he may have to suffer first! You won't put him in jail, will you?"

"That will depend on the judge, not on us at all," said Lon. "We have no right to keep him a prisoner here, at any rate, any longer than is necessary."

"Wait, at least, until father comes home!" Elsie was fairly pleading Kit's cause by this time.

"We shall probably meet him on the way," replied Lon.

"He hasn't eaten anything yet."

"That's his own fault," said Tom. "He might have been eating when he was telling you fibs."

"Promise, at any rate, that you won't tie his hands again."

"We won't tie him if he behaves himself," said Lon. "Come, my boy!" laying his hand on Kit's shoulder.

Kit rose with a fluttering heart.

"I don't suppose there's any use of my telling you again what I've told you before," he said, indulging a faint hope that Elsie's intercession might have changed her brothers' intentions toward him.

"Not a bit of use," Lon answered, kindly enough, but firmly. "We'll give you a chance to tell it to the judge; that's all we can do."

"Well! *you* have been good to me!" said Kit, his voice quivering, and his eyes glistening, as he turned a grateful look on Elsie. "Some time," he added, choking a little, then resolutely mastering the passion that swelled his heart, "you'll *know* that what I have told you is true, and then you won't be sorry you took my part."

"I know it well enough now," she replied, as Lon led him away; "but don't blame my brothers too much."

"Oh, I don't blame them!"

Kit mounted to the wagon-seat with Lon and Tom, and as he rode away amid the tall trunks of

the sunlit grove, he took off his base-ball cap to her, in a bar of the golden light; a smile of tender brightness suddenly irradiating his anxious face, as he looked back at her, while his lips shaped an inaudible —

“Good-by!”

CHAPTER XVII.

"A PERFECTLY CLEAR CASE."

THAT last smile of the captive lingered long in the mind's eye of Elsie Benting, standing in the door of the old farm-house, while the wagon that bore him with Lon and Tom, and Charley on horseback, disappeared up the road beyond the grove.

She hoped they would meet her father before reaching the magistrate's office, and that he also would be quickly convinced of Kit's innocence. But when they had been gone about half an hour, Mr. Benting returned home, with her mother, by another street.

They had seen nothing of the boys; and now Elsie had the surprising news to relate of their finding the horse, and stopping at home on their way to Duckford village with the little rider in the white cap.

"But he's no more a horse-thief than I am!" she asserted. "He is just a bashful boy. You should have seen how he blushed when I was talking to

him! It's a strange story he tells, but I believe every word of it."

Mr. Benting, a tall man with white whiskers, and exceedingly pleasant eyes peering out from under bushy gray brows, stood by his buggy wheel at the door, looking down with a sort of humorous interest at the young girl, as she told, with no little dramatic effect, the story of the supposed horse-thief.

"And I think it is too bad, too cruel," she said, at the end, "that that poor boy should have to go to jail."

"It would be too bad, truly," Mr. Benting replied, laying his hand fondly on her shoulder, "if he is as innocent as you suppose. But it isn't a very probable story, Elsie. Now do you think it is? Consider a minute."

"But while we are considering," said Elsie, "they are putting him in jail!"

"That's most likely where he belongs, I'm sorry to say," replied her father, with quiet good humor, curiously in contrast with her excitement. "It's just such a story as every rogue has at his tongue's end to explain away his roguery when he gets caught in it."

"I wish we had been at home," said Mrs. Benting, as he helped her from the buggy.

"So do I; for, after all, Elsie may be right. She is pretty shrewd in her judgments of people. And I'll tell you what I'm going to do, little girl, to please you." The paternal mouth puckered in a playful, affectionate smile. "I am going to drive after the boys and see that they have made no mistake."

"Oh, what a dear, delightful old papa!" Elsie cried, joyfully, putting up her face to kiss him.

"You'll have dinner first, won't you?" said Mrs. Benting.

"Shall I?" He gave a sidelong, teasing look at Elsie. "Well, never mind about dinner for me till I come back. I think I shall know, when I see the fellow, how big a rascal he is. Though I warn you at the outset, little one, that the boys are probably right about him."

Mounting the buggy as he spoke, he wheeled about among the trees, and disappeared up the dusty road.

The hour Elsie had to wait for his return seemed interminable. But at last, going out for the twentieth time to take a peep from under the maples, she saw the buggy and the wagon coming, with Charley on General galloping before.

Her father was alone in the buggy, but Lon and

Tom were in the wagon. Where, then, was the youthful prisoner whom she had confidently expected to see return with them?

"What did I tell you?" cried Charley, turning up under the trees. "The idea of your taking the part of a fellow like that!"

Her face, bright at first with expectation, had assumed a shade of doubt, which now deepened to disappointment and dismay.

"Now, Charley," she remonstrated, "don't say that! What have you done with him?"

"Ask father," replied Charley. "He'll tell you he had only to look at him to be perfectly sure of the kind of character he is."

"Don't tell me, Charles Benting," exclaimed his sister, "that father thought as badly of him as you boys did; I never will believe it!"

"He does think of him just as badly as we do," he insisted, with a change of tense which she failed to notice. "And the judge —"

As he slipped off the horse, he was careful to turn his face, in which was a struggling smile he did not wish her to see.

"What did he say?" she demanded.

"He said it was a perfectly clear case. Stolen horse found in the possession of the boy that was

seen to take him and ride him away — there was only one thing to be done about it."

"What was that?"

"Commit him to jail, of course."

"Oh! he didn't!" said the indignant Elsie.

"Yes he did; sober truth!" Charley insisted. "Ask the boys; ask father. Say, boys," — to Lon and Tom, just then driving up, — "didn't the judge say it was a clear case, and that he must go to jail? And doesn't father think of him just as we do? She won't believe a word I say!"

Lon and Tom were laughing. Mr. Benting's face likewise wore a good-humored smile as he drove up and heard the controversy. Getting no satisfaction from her brothers, she appealed to him.

"Well, yes, my dear," he said, "I think my opinion of that boy *is* about the same as theirs. And the judge *did* commit him to jail. Charles has told you nothing but the truth; but he hasn't told you quite all the truth. What do you want to bother your sister so for, Charles?" he added, in a tone of not very severe reproof.

"To punish her for crowing over us, as she will when she hears the rest," Charles made answer.

"Oh, tell me, father!" cried the eager Elsie.

And he told briefly what it is now time for us to relate a little more in detail.

The boys, finding they had missed their father on the way to the village, proceeded to the office of the Duckford justice, whom they had the luck to catch as he was going out to dinner. Charley rode on to find a constable, while Lon and Tom went in and made oath to their complaint against the prisoner.

It seemed, indeed, a perfectly clear case; and the magistrate was impatient to sniff the odors of the roast beef which he knew was just then coming out of the home oven. He gave little heed and less credence to the boy's story; but promised that he should have ample opportunity to bring proof of it at the hearing which he appointed for the following day.

"Suppose I can't get my friends here by that time?" queried Kit.

"The hearing may be postponed, in that case. You can employ counsel, and the court will do everything for you that is deemed necessary and proper."

With these words the judge rose from his seat, putting on his hat; and Kit, for want of bail, was marched out in charge of the constable.

He was thinking miserably of the strait to which

his blundering had brought him at last; the degradation of being put into the lock-up; the expense of a lawyer; the difficulty of getting Uncle Gray or anybody else to come and testify in his behalf; the distress of his widowed mother, and the amusement or disgust of enemies and friends, when they should hear of his predicament; with all the wretchedness of uncertainty and delay in the disentanglement of this dreadful snarl he had got himself into; he was thinking of all this as he walked away with the officer, when a voice called out:—

“Wait a minute!”

It was the voice of Lon Benting.

Lon and his brothers had had time to cool off, after the first flush of victory; and Elsie's more favorable opinion of the prisoner was beginning to influence them. Then Kit's straightforward recital of his story to the judge, without contradiction of his previous statements in the least particular, shook their boyish self-confidence, and caused them to look furtively at one another, with misgivings which each tried to conceal.

In short, the more they saw of Kit, the less they saw of the villain circumstance and prejudice had made him appear. It was not half the satisfaction they had anticipated, to see him led away to the

lock-up. Lon and Tom, especially, were feeling the weight of their responsibility in the doubtful business, when they were vastly relieved at sight of a well known buggy coming down the street.

"It's father!" Tom said to the justice, just then hurrying off to his dinner. "He will want to see you."

Mr. Benting being a citizen whom everybody was glad to oblige, the magistrate paused reluctantly, and stood by his door while the buggy turned up to it. The officer also stopped, a few paces off, with his prisoner. There were a few spectators, who had witnessed the scene in the office, and more were gathering; men walking leisurely across the street, and boys in the distance running and shrieking.

"What's going on here?" said Mr. Benting, drawing rein. "You've got General, I see, boys!" eyeing the horse with satisfaction. "And the rogue — is that the rogue?" peering out from under his bushy gray brows at the little captive.

"All we know is, we caught him riding our horse away," said Tom.

"How much of a rogue he is," added Lon, "remains to be proved."

Kit could not help noticing the changed manner

toward him of Elsie's big, obstinate brothers. Very different now the tone, which had been so boisterous, and the judgment, which had been so stern.

"How is it, judge?" Mr. Benting inquired.

"There seemed abundant evidence to justify a commitment," the judge explained.

Mr. Benting alighted from his buggy, and stood looking down searchingly at the miserable youngster.

Conscious of the scrutiny, and aware of many eyes fixed upon him, looking for signs of guilt in his burning face, poor Kit was very much abashed. His head was hot, his temples were throbbing, his cheeks on fire; and to save his soul he could not have kept his suffused eyes from falling before Mr. Benting's. First they dropped from that gentleman's eyes to his white whiskers; then went down his coat-front, button by button; switched off on the right leg, descended that to the boot, and so glided to the ground.

The very necessity he felt of standing up stoutly, and answering the gaze of Elsie's father with an air of open innocence, helped to betray him into this appearance of guilt. He was angry with himself, for his blushes and weak eyes; and with quick, fierce

breath, and teeth set hard, struggled to regain his self-control.

"Come!" said Mr. Benting, eying him with an expression of keen curiosity, tempered by humorous compassion, "tell me frankly just how much of a rogue you are."

CHAPTER XVIII.

KIT AND MR. BENTING.

THEN Kit looked up. He was himself again. "I'm not used to being called a rogue," he replied; "and I can't answer such a question as that."

"But they say you were taken riding away my horse," said Mr. Benting. "How do you account for that?"

"I've explained five or six times already how that happened," said Kit. "But I'll explain some more, and be glad to, if it will do any good."

Mr. Benting turned to the judge.

"This is hardly the place to talk with him; and, if you've no objection, I'd like to see him a few minutes in your office."

"Certainly," said the judge, with a despairing thought of his dinner. And entering with Kit and the constable, Mr. Benting and Lon and Tom, he closed the door and shut out the crowd.

There Mr. Benting sat down in a leather-cushioned chair, and, crossing his legs, which were rather

long, questioned, in a kindly but searching manner, Kit standing before him, still flushed, but resolute.

"I've heard something of your story, and I must say it hasn't seemed to me very probable. But it may be true, for all that. 'Fact stranger than fiction,' is an old saying, and a true saying. Where did you mount my horse, when you mistook him for your uncle's?"

"Under one of the cattle-sheds at the fair," said Kit.

"As I remember them, these sheds are very low-roofed. I shouldn't have thought you could mount very comfortably under them."

"I couldn't ; I had to stoop. I hit my head as it was." Kit's voice was growing steady, his countenance more and more open, and now something like a smile lighted it up as he added : "I remember how the oyster-crackers spilled out of my breast-pockets as I leaned over on the horse's neck."

"We found oyster-crackers scattered on the ground," said Lon, willing to corroborate this part of the boy's story.

"Why didn't you lead the horse out before you mounted?" Mr. Benting inquired. "It seems to me that would have been the most natural thing to do."

"So it would. But the fellow who helped me off had arranged everything. He did all he could to confuse me, and then boosted me on the horse and hurried me off before I could see through his trick. Of course," Kit added, with beaming candor, "if he had let me lead the horse out from under the dark shed, I should have noticed the difference between him and our Dandy."

"Is Dandy the name of your horse?"

"Yes; Dandy Jim. It's the name he had when my uncle bought him." Kit smiled again. "I don't suppose my uncle would have given a horse such a name as that."

"Why not?"

"I can hardly explain. Only Uncle Gray isn't the kind of man to think of that kind of name."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"Rather serious; what you would call a practical man; not much nonsense about him."

"It strikes me," remarked Mr. Benting, "that such a man—a practical man, as you call him—would have managed this affair a little differently when he found that a boy acting for him had brought home the wrong horse. I can hardly conceive of his letting you come alone to return him."

"He would have come himself, — he spoke of it, —

but he was sick this morning. And as I had made the blunder, I thought I ought to correct it."

"What's his ailment?"

A peculiarly bright look flashed out of Kit's eyes as he answered, using the flat vernacular pronunciation of the word:—

"Azmy. That's what uncle and aunt call it. He got chilled when he went out in the damp air to look at the horse last night, and this morning he had several bumble-bees' nests in his throat."

"What does he do for his asthma?" Mr. Benting inquired.

"He shuts himself up in his room, and burns an herb that has been steeped in saltpetre. The smoke would kill me"—Kit smiled again—"but he thinks it cures him."

Mr. Benting had several more questions to ask about the uncle and aunt, and the farm, and Kit's father and mother; to all which he received such prompt and natural replies, often spiced with humor, that he was forced to conclude that so much, at least, of the boy's story was not all fiction. He then wished to know why Kit, who claimed to have been on his way to Peaceville when captured, was first seen riding in the other direction. That brought out the story of the knife, which Mr. Benting asked to

see. Examining it, he found the letters C. D. engraved on the handle.

"Are these your initials?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Kit, who had already told his name, first to the Benting boys, then to the judge, and lastly to Mr. Benting himself. "They were my father's initials, too; the knife used to belong to him. I thought more of it for that reason; I never supposed it would be the means of getting me into a scrape!"

Mr. Benting gave back the knife; then turned to the judge.

"I believe this is an honest boy, and if you will fix his bail at a reasonable figure, I will be his surety."

"I am glad to hear it," said the judge, perhaps almost as much on Kit's account as out of regard for his dinner.

A bond was quickly filled out and duly signed; and Kit, to his great joy, was declared free to proceed about his business until his presence should be again required by the court.

"Now, the best thing you can do," said Mr. Benting, "is to go home with me and stay till you get over your fatigue and worry. I'll promise you better treatment than you have received from my boys hitherto."

Kit thought of Elsie and the charming old farmhouse at Maple Park with a thrill of pleasant anticipation. But the gleam that crossed his face was quickly succeeded by shadow.

"I should like to," he replied. "But I must make one more attempt to find my uncle's horse, the first thing I do."

"How are you going to work?"

"I shall go to Peaceville, where I certainly saw him yesterday, and try to trace him from there. If your sons," Kit added, with a glance at Lon, "will tell me all they found out about the fellow they took to be my accomplice, and the horse he had, which was our Dandy, they may help me now as much as they have hindered me."

The oldest of the brothers thereupon endeavored to atone for the unintentional wrong they had done their late captive, by giving a true account of their adventure with Brunlow the night before.

"After we heard that he and you had been seen together, we believed he was aiding and abetting you; but we didn't follow him up. We left that for a policeman to do, while we made haste to hire another horse and get on the track of ours. The last we saw of your man he was going off in a buggy with the driver, who had bought your horse, leading

him by a halter ; to make a bill of sale of him somewhere, they said."

Kit took the name of the policeman, who, he was told, would probably be on duty that afternoon, near the fair-ground entrance. He also asked if Mr. Benting would have any objection to giving him a line, over his signature, stating that his horse, supposed to be stolen, had been returned, having been taken by mistake.

"What do you want of such a writing as that?" Mr. Benting asked, more and more pleased with the boy's modest manners, intelligence, and apparently honest intentions.

"I want it to show, if there should be any danger of my being taken up a second time for the same imaginary offence," Kit answered, with shrewd good humor. "Your policeman will probably recognize me before I can explain myself; and he may clap me into jail without believing a word of my story."

"I'll make that all right."

Mr. Benting borrowed the judge's pen (the judge had already escaped and gone to his roast beef), and wrote a paper, which he handed Kit, saying:—

"There! I think that will keep you out of any more such tangles. I hope you will find your horse,

and give us a call on your way back, or whenever you come this way again."

He gave Kit his hand, with a pressure of the most cordial interest and good will. Then Tom stepped up:—

"There's a man out here who lives two or three miles away, on the road to Peaceville. He is just going to start for home, and I think he will give this boy a ride. Suppose you speak to him, father."

The man, appealed to by the elder Benting, readily consented; and Kit climbed into his wagon, thankful enough for his release from court and constable, and for this piece of good luck.

The brothers said good-by to him in quite friendly fashion; and Lon begged his pardon for what he was by this time pretty well convinced had been a blunder on their part.

"It's blunders all round!" laughed Kit. "A fellow that can make 'em as fast as I do, ought not to be too hard on others."

Father and sons stood watching him as he rode away.

"If we hadn't sent your hired horse back to Peaceville this morning," Mr. Benting remarked, "he might have had him to ride. It would have been just the thing for him."

That reminded Lon of something.

"Ho ! hallo !" he called after Kit. "How about your saddle and bridle ?"

Everybody had forgotten these until that moment.

"Keep 'em till I come for them," Kit answered, looking back regretfully at the tall farmer standing with his sons, and remembering the invitation he had declined — an invitation which might have taken him back to Maple Park and the friendly Elsie.

So they returned home without him, and Charley fooled his sister with half the truth, as we have seen ; and her father told the rest.

"The judge did commit him to jail, my dear ; but luckily I was there to offer bail for him before he was locked up. And it is true, — I had only to look at him to see the kind of character he is. But it would be better for the boys to say they have come round to my opinion, than that I think as they do about him. They think very differently from what they did at first. You were quite right, Elsie, and they were quite wrong, or I am no judge of an honest boy."

So saying, Mr. Benting stepped from the buggy.

"And you have let him go free?" said the delighted Elsie.

"I suppose it will amount to that ; although he is

under bonds to appear again if the court wants him."

"Now why don't you crow over us, Elsie?" laughed Charley.

But Elsie, too deeply grateful for Kit's vindication and release to think of her own triumph, had no wish to "crow."

CHAPTER XIX.

MORE BLUNDERS.

KIT was by this time well on his way to Peaceville ; and two hours later he might have been seen entering the village, walking fast, with his coat on his arm.

It was not the road by which he had entered or left it the day before, and on overtaking a little bent old man he inquired the way to the fair-grounds.

“Second turn to the left brings you in sight of the big ox-yoke,” said the little bent old man, whose gait was slow, and who was also very deaf.

Kit hurried on, shifting the coat he carried from one sweaty arm to the other, and was just turning the corner indicated, when the little old man called to him, far back on the road.

“What is it ?” cried Kit, turning and gazing.

The little old man made an odd gesture, and came trudging on, with his head down again, at a snail’s pace, as it seemed to the hurrying Christopher.

“What do you want ?” called the boy, again, at the top of his voice.

But the little bent old man did not answer nor look up again ; he probably did not hear.

"He thinks I may take the wrong turn," thought the boy. "But I can't wait for him to come up, and I won't go back."

When the little bent old man finally did look up, he was surprised to find that the boy had vanished.

"Couldn't he wait a minute?" he said, clinching his right hand and shaking it, while leaning with his left on a stout cane. "Well! it is of no consequence, I suppose."

Anxious, and not very hopeful, Kit came in sight of the great ox-yoke over the fair-ground entrance, which he seemed to have seen in some past stage of existence,—so long ago, and so like a dream, appeared his unlucky adventures of the day before! Had he really encountered Brunlow and discovered Dandy Jim within that thronged enclosure?

He had, of course, no expectation of finding them there now ; and remembering how he had let them slip through his hands when every circumstance was in his favor, he thought of his present quest as something very discouraging indeed.

The same gate-keeper was on duty of whom he had made inquiries the day before. He regarded Kit with some surprise.

"Why!" said he, with lively interest, "you are the boy in the white cap who rode off the Duckford horse last evening!"

"I'm the very boy," said Kit, putting on his coat. "And I want to find Mr. Knowles, the policeman."

"That will suit all round," said the gate-keeper; "for I've no doubt Mr. Knowles will be glad to find *you*. Knowles!" he called out.

The same officer whose acquaintance Kit had made the previous afternoon turned away from the race-course, round which the same trotters Kit had seen then (so it seemed to him) were raising the same cloud of dust; and leisurely approached the entrance. He quickened his pace on seeing Kit, whom he likewise regarded with surprised curiosity.

"Where did you pick him up?" he said, to the gate-keeper; and stepping quickly forward, he took Kit by the arm.

"He asked for you," said the gate-keeper.

"Asked for me? Well, what do you want of me, young man?"

Aware that he was viewed with suspicion, Kit, though prepared for the occasion, changed color, and stammered out:—

"I want — I am after — that horse!"

"What horse? The one you stole, or the one you pretended was stolen, or some other?" added the officer.

"The one that was stolen —" began Kit.

"Well, I think you can tell us more about that than anybody else can! Do you know," said Mr. Knowles, scrutinizing him sharply, "I have instructions to arrest you? You act as if you weren't aware of the fact, but you're the boy that took the Benting horse, sure as you live!"

"Yes, I am," said Kit. He smiled, congratulating himself on his foresight in providing proof of his innocence for this very emergency. "I took the wrong horse, as you will see, by mistake; I will show you." He fumbled in his pockets. "I have a paper — somewhere —"

His fumbling became hurried and nervous, and he suddenly turned pale.

"What's your game?" said the wondering officer.

"I have a paper," poor Kit repeated, in accents of alarm and distress — "or I had it — one Mr. Benting gave me." He pulled his pockets inside out, and stared at them in blank dismay, exclaiming, "I've lost it!"

"What sort of a paper was it?" Mr. Knowles inquired.

"A sort of certificate, saying that I had returned the horse which I had taken by mistake," replied Kit. "Mr. Benting gave it to me, so that I shouldn't get into trouble on that account while trying again to find my uncle's horse."

The officer smiled incredulously. "You're a pretty sharp boy," he said, "but not quite sharp enough. I saw through your tricks yesterday, when it was a little too late; but I think I see through this one just in time. There are no more horses for you to ride off by mistake at this cattle-show, and you may as well come along with me."

"Do you think," cried the astonished Christopher, "that if I had stolen a horse here yesterday, I would be back here inquiring for you to-day?"

"I shouldn't suppose so," replied the officer; "but you seem to have done that very thing. Though why you should ask for me—a policeman—is a riddle I can't guess."

"It was because you *are* a policeman, and I wanted to show you that paper and get your help," protested Christopher. "The Benting boys said you could tell me if the man had been heard from who sold the other horse—my uncle's horse—the horse I am looking for; and perhaps you would know who the man is who bought him. I thought

you might at least direct me to the grocery where the bill of sale was made out."

"I can do that," said Knowles, "when I'm satisfied you are telling me the truth. But what was you telling me yesterday?"

"The truth," declared Christopher.

"It didn't appear so," said the unbelieving officer. "If I was ever satisfied of anything, it was that you and the rogue you are inquiring for were accomplices. He and you had been seen together, to all appearances, on friendly terms; and I have positive evidence that he helped you off with the Benting horse."

"He did," said Kit, who once more tried to explain the complication to unbelieving ears. Again he searched his pockets and exclaimed, almost crying with vexation, "Oh, if I only had that paper! I *am* the carelessst fellow!"

"See here, my fine bird!" remarked the astute officer, "I don't take much stock in that paper; and I believe it's my duty to hold you in custody."

A small crowd had gathered about them by this time. Just as Knowles was marching his prisoner off, up trudged the little bent old man.

"Here, young fellow," he said; "is this yours?"

And once more he reached out a palsy-shaken hand.

The trembling fingers relaxed, and disclosed a crumpled paper, which Kit snatched at eagerly.

"That's mine! that's it!" he joyfully exclaimed.

"Where did you get it, Mr. Graves?" asked the policeman, in a loud voice, adapted to deaf ears.

"Back in the street, here," said the little old man. "I thought it dropped out of this boy's coat, which he had on his arm; and I called to him, but he didn't seem to know what he had lost. After I got home, I put on my glasses and read it, and, thinking it might be important, I followed him up here."

"You have done me a great favor, and I can't thank you enough for it!" said Kit, with fervent gratitude.

He handed the paper to the policeman, who read as follows:—

To all whom it may concern:—

This is to certify that the bearer, Christopher Downimede, of East Adam, who took my horse from the Peaceville Fair-Ground yesterday, mistaking him for one belonging to his uncle, has returned him to me this day in good condition, with a satisfactory explanation of the circumstances. And I hereby cordially commend him to all good citizens generally, and especially to Mr. Knowles, the officer on duty at the cattle-show, who, I am sure, will be serving a good cause by assisting him in his search for his uncle's missing horse.

DAVID BENTING, of Duckford.

"This puts a new face on the matter," said the policeman. "Lucky for you, my boy, this paper turned up in time!"

"As I carried my coat," Kit explained, "the pocket hung down over my arm; I never thought of what was in it. I am one of those boys," he added, with a cheerful gleam overspreading his troubled face, "who can never think of more than one thing at a time!"

"There's no great harm done in this case, thanks to Mr. Graves, here," said the officer; "though I rather think, but for him, I should have had to lock you up till the Bentings could be sent for, in spite of your plausible story and honest face. Now let's see what can be done for you."

CHAPTER XX.

ELI BADGER'S GRAPES.

"I WANT to find my uncle's horse, — that's the principal thing," said Christopher. "At the same time I should like to see the rogue caught who stole him." And he repeated what the Benting boys had told him.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you much more," said Mr. Knowles; "only that the horse you say belongs to your uncle was sold to a man in Southmere; I forget his name — Baggage, Bradish, or something of that sort. The rogue got away before we came to the conclusion that he *was* a rogue — got off with an honest man's money, it seems."

"I was afraid of that," said Christopher. "Who is this Mr. Baggage, or Bradish?"

"Or Bradger; that's more like it," rejoined the officer. "The most I know of him is that he's a farmer over in Southmere; and about as thick-set and stiff-necked — if he has a neck — and unaccommodating an old codger, from all I can hear, as any you'll be

apt to run against. They can tell you more about him at Hine's grocery, where the bill of sale was made out."

"That's just the place I want to find!" said Kit.

"Mr. Graves is going within a stone's throw of it. Mr. Graves!" The officer lowered his face and raised his voice, shouting in the ear of the bent and deaf little old man. "Will you show this boy Hine's grocery?"

The little old man nodded and started off. Kit turned to thank the policeman for his kindness.

"That's all right," said Knowles; "though it might have been all wrong if it hadn't been for that paper, which I advise you not to lose a second time, for I'm not the only officer furnished with your description and instructions to arrest you."

"That's a pleasant thing to know," laughed Kit, rather uncomfortably, as he felt the paper in his pocket. "But I think I can take care of myself now."

He parted from the separating crowd at the gate, and, guided by Mr. Graves, soon found himself at the door of Hine's grocery. Thanking again the little old man for the very great favor he had done him, he took leave of him there, and entered, with an anxiously swelling heart. He felt certain that he

was once more on the track of Dandy Jim, whom any but the most blundering boy in the world might now reasonably expect to find.

"Is Mr. Hine in?" he asked of a smooth-faced man behind the counter.

"That's my name," the smooth-faced man replied.

Kit drew a quick breath, and continued:—

"Mr. Knowles, the policeman, directed me to you, Mr. Hine." Mr. Hine bowed. "I wish to inquire about two men who came here last night—"

"Oh, yes! I know!" interrupted the grocer, with a smile. "That horse business. You're not the first person who has come to inquire."

"Excuse me for troubling you again," said Kit; and he proceeded to explain the object of his visit.

"I think you will have little difficulty in finding your horse," said Mr. Hine. The boy's heart bounded exultingly. "But as to getting him—that's another thing."

"You know the man who bought him—Mr. Baggage, or Braggage?" queried Kit.

"Badger is his name; Eli Badger, of Southmere," replied the grocer. "I know him very well; and I forewarn you that you won't find him a very pleasant customer to deal with."

"But if I can show that he has a horse that rightfully belongs to my uncle—" began Kit.

"If you can prove that, you can eventually recover your uncle's property, no doubt. I shouldn't like to say that Badger is a man who would buy a stolen horse, knowing him to be stolen; but having got one in his possession, and paid for him—well," laughed Mr. Hine, "all I can say is, I should like to see the boy of your size who could take that horse away from Eli Badger, of Southmere!"

"It will do no hurt to try," replied Kit; "at any rate, it will be a point gained to find the horse in his possession. You don't speak as if you considered him a very just man."

"He may be a just man in his way," said Mr. Hine. "But of all the grasping, grudging, cross-grained people that I ever had any dealings with, Eli Badger, of Southmere, is the beat. I pity you, youngster, if you've got to get a horse out of him!"

"If I can't, maybe somebody else can," said Kit, with a troubled yet resolute face. "About how far is it to the place where he lives?"

"It's a good six miles to Southmere village, and he lives somewhere beyond that. He has a small farm, and raises a great quantity of grapes."

"I must try to get there to-night," said Kit, with





an anxious glance at the grocer's clock. "But first I should like to ask about the man who sold him the horse."

Having received a very good description of his friend Cassius Brunlow, he went on to make further inquiries concerning that uncertain individual, at the Peaceville stove-stores.

Brunlow's story of his being employed in one of them turned out, naturally, to be a little fiction devised for hoodwinking poor Kit; no Peaceville dealer in hardware or tinware being found who had ever heard of the itinerant tinker.

Having spent more time and strength than he could well afford in making these fruitless inquiries, Kit set off at length, weary and footsore, on the road to Southmere.

It was at the close of a second harassing and toilsome day that he entered the little village, glad to know that the man he was in search of, and most probably the horse, were now not far off. Eli Badger was well known to several persons of whom he had latterly inquired the way; and each had added a stroke to the not very agreeable portrait Hine, of Peaceville, had so broadly outlined.

"Not a very obliging man," one had said, in reply to Kit's questions.

"Grouty," said another.

"The most obstinate old pig that ever went without a poke," said a third.

Kit was not at all ambitious to encounter the original of this picture; but the now almost absolute certainty of discovering Dandy Jim cheered him on.

At dusk, in the base-ball cap, that had once been white, but which was beginning to show the effects of travel on dusty roads, — tired, toil-stained, and hungry, he paused doubtfully on a corner and looked around. He saw a man coming out of a refreshment saloon, and accosted him.

"How far is it to Eli Badger's place?" he inquired.

"Badger? Eli Badger?" The man pointed. "He lives about a mile away, on this street."

Kit gave a weary sigh, and remembered wishfully the invitation Mr. Benting had given him to visit the family on his return.

"And Duckford," he said; "how far is it to Duckford?"

"Over to Duckford Centre" — the man pointed in another direction — "it's about five miles."

Kit stood a moment longer, painfully hesitating. What was the use of his going farther that night? It was not likely that he could even get a sight of

Dandy Jim before morning. To make any attempt to gain possession of him before then, or to give notice of his uncle's claim on him, might prove a fatal blunder; and Kit was resolved to avoid blunders in the future.

"I wish Duckford wasn't quite so far away," he said to himself. "I might go over to Maple Park, and perhaps get Mr. Benting to help me about Dandy in the morning."

And before the mind's eye of the harassed and lonesome boy was the bright image of a young girl who had befriended him when he most needed a friend.

"If I only had Dandy to ride! or if I could hop on a wagon going in that direction!" he said to himself, as he cast longing glances up the dim Duckford road. "I might walk it!" He dismissed that notion quickly from his mind, however, and entered the saloon to rest his sore feet and tired limbs, and study the situation over an oyster stew.

"I won't do anything again in a hurry, nor anything particularly foolish, if I can help it," he said to himself, while awaiting his order in a private stall.

It was a great satisfaction to him to think he had traced Dandy to the hands of a responsible farmer.

"It must be Dandy, and no mistake," he rea-

soned, recalling all the evidence he had obtained regarding Brunlow's trade, and descriptions of the horse Eli Badger had received of him and led away. "I'm sorry for the man who has been swindled out of his money; but he might have known there was something wrong about a horse that was offered so cheap."

The stew came, and while he was cooling it, he perceived by the sound of voices that three or four persons were entering the next stall. They laughed and chatted, and gave their orders in a way that enabled him to label them in a word —

"Roughs!"

There was only a low partition between the stalls the space above being open; and he could hear much of their conversation, even when they adapted their tones to the discussion of a business which demanded privacy. That business he was also soon enabled to characterize by a single word —

"Roguary!"

He sipped his soup, and pondered his own plans, giving little heed to what was going on in the adjacent stall, until his attention was arrested by a distinctly pronounced name —

"Eli Badger!"

Then Kit pricked up his ears.

"Be on the spot, you and Mack," one was saying, "ready to give us the signal. If everything is all right, we'll stop our team at the corner of the lane, this side."

"At half-past ten," said another.

"That's too early, aint it, boys?" said a third.

"We'll know by the way things look," was the reply. "If the lights in the house are out at half-past nine, half-past ten will be late enough; they'll all be asleep by that time. Badger's too stingy to keep a dog, and we shall make precious little noise."

"It's a daisy of a night for it," said one of the other speakers. "Moon'll be well up by that time. You can't do such a job in no sort of decent shape without a moon."

"If nothing happens to trip us, we'll just scoop the thing to-night," was the rejoinder. "I was by there to-day, and the trellises was jest black with 'em."

Then another: "He's leaving them as long as he dares to, but he won't resk 'em many nights more, fear of frosts. They're ripe enough for us. It's to-night or never."

"Mostly Concords," said one.

"Concords and Delawares," said another. "We go for the Concords. They're the easiest handled;

bigger clusters; you can pick two bushels while you're picking one of Delawares."

"Take both kinds," was the chuckling response. "All we can git, or our team can carry; them's my principles."

"Don't talk so loud, boys!" said a more cautious whisper; "somebody'll hear us."

"Aint nobody anywheres nigh," replied another suppressed voice, the owner of which put his head out of the stall and gave a wary glance about the saloon.

"But half-past ten is too early," somebody insisted. "Folks may be going by."

Eleven was finally agreed upon. Then followed a discussion of the way the booty was to be disposed of, and other details of the enterprise, which one, who appeared to be the ringleader, finally summed up in a few words, adding, —

"Now do you all hook on?"

Without waiting to hear whether they all "hooked on" or not, Kit slipped out of the stall, paid for his dish of oysters, and departed.

CHAPTER XXI.

ELI BADGER'S CUDGEL.

HE had about made up his mind to spend the night in the village and go on to Badger's farm in the morning. But now he said to himself:—

“Those scamps mean to rob his grape-vines to-night. That won't make him a very good-natured man to-morrow. I wish I could manage somehow to let him know of their little scheme.”

How thankful he himself would have been for information which might have prevented the stealing of his uncle's horse! He thought of that, and resolved that he would, in this case, do as he would be done by.

“I'll go on and tell him myself. That will make an excuse for calling on him. Then I will do what seems best about speaking of Dandy.”

It cannot be denied that in this affair Kit's motives were mixed, as the motives of mere mortals commonly are. He did not by any means forget his own interests when he resolved to do Eli Badger a

favor. And yet, with his strong love of justice, he felt an unselfish desire to see even the unobliging Eli protect himself from the depredations of those marauders.

He made inquiries for Badger's place of two or three persons on the road, and was told that he would know it by the grape-vine trellises between the lane and the house.

It was a gloomy, anxious walk, after all the day's fatigues. Evening had come on, and the moon had not yet risen. There were few houses on that solitary road. The fields were lonely and open; the still stars looked down upon him; nocturnal insects trilled in the wayside elders and wild cherries, whose shapes were dimly defined against the western horizon.

He thought of his mother in that dreary walk, and felt sure that she was thinking anxiously of him. Had she yet heard of his strange and ridiculous blunder in bringing home the wrong horse? Or was she even then waiting for him to come dashing in, as he often did in the evening, and tell her the whole story of his triumph in finding Dandy at the fair the day before?

"I'll make it a real triumph before I get through," thought he, as he trudged on. And Uncle and Aunt

Gray, were they talking of him and his amazing heedlessness at that moment? And the Bentings!

"If I get Dandy," he said to himself, "I'll ride him over to Maple Park bareback, and get the saddle."

And his bashful boyish heart thrilled at the anticipation of meeting a certain pair of sympathetic blue eyes.

His mind was recalled from its wanderings by the appearance of a house, set well back from the street.

"This must be Eli Badger's," he said. "Here is the lane, and the corner where those grape-thieves talked of stopping their horse; over there must be the trellises." But looking down upon them from the street, which was somewhat higher than the garden, he could not make them out in the darkness. He had the idea fixed in his mind, from a description of the place some one had given him, that the lane formed the principal approach to the premises. It was open, and he walked into it, having no doubt that it would take him to the house, toward which he was drawn by two dimly lighted windows. He soon found, however, that he was leaving them on his right.

He believed there must be somewhere a gate, which he had failed to find; and walked back a lit-

tle way, exploring the lane in search of it. Discovering neither gate nor bars, he concluded to simplify matters by climbing the fence and crossing the yard to the house, which seemed so near.

He got over and was advancing carefully, when an obstacle rose before him like another fence. This time it was a rather high obstacle; a grape-trellis, in fact. He was not sorry to make the discovery, for he was beginning to fear he had mistaken another place for Badger's.

"Here are more trellises!" he said to himself; and he was groping to find a way around them, when a rustling noise caused him to stop in some alarm.

The gloom and strangeness of the place had excited his boyish imagination, and he was prepared for a good fright, when a dark object, in the direction of the noise, detached itself from the mass of the heavily draped frames, and advanced toward him.

Not knowing whether it was man or beast, he recoiled instinctively and scrambled to the fence. Immediately the rustle became a rush, and with an appalling tramp of heavy feet, the creature plunged after him.

It was no beast, — perhaps we should qualify the

assertion by saying it was no dumb beast,—but broad-backed Eli Badger himself, who was out there, with a stout stick of the hickory variety, keeping guard over his vineyard. Vengeance for the misdeeds of many plundering youngsters animated the keen eyes that watched, the rushing feet, and the arm upraised to strike.

The arm descended, and the cudgel with it, just as poor Kit was climbing the fence.

Thwack! whack! First a blow on the boy's back, then another, aimed at his shoulder, fell on that lamentably slight protection to his skull, the closely fitting base-ball cap; and down tumbled a dark body, dreadfully limp and silent, at Eli Badger's feet.

It was the blundering Christopher, who had fallen with scarcely an outcry at the second stroke; the case in which he carried those unlucky brains of his having proved no match for the Badger arm and club.

"I've done for him, sure as Gath!" said Eli, stooping to lift the lifeless lump of a boy.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WRONG BOY.

THE stout farmer's uppermost feeling, when he saw what he and his hickory cane had accomplished, was not pity for his victim, — whom he might have thought rightly served, whatever happened to him, — but alarm at his own share in that happening.

To be summoned in court to answer the charge of soundly beating a boy caught pillaging his vines, was something he had generally thought he could stand, if the boy could. But cracking skulls in punishment for the offence of filching a few grapes, was quite another thing. And he was not certain that this boy had touched a cluster.

"Who be ye? Why don't ye speak?" he said, trying to get the body into a sitting posture. "None of your make-believe with me!"

But the body would not sit; and it was soon too painfully apparent that there was no "make-believe" in the business. Something warm and wet dropped

from the still face upon his hand; and the soul of him, — if, despite the popular prejudice, Eli Badger had a soul, — shrivelled with consternation.

He took the body up in his great arms, and was not relieved to find what a mere lad he had set upon with his murderous bludgeon. If he had knocked down a man like himself, it wouldn't have seemed quite so bad.

It was a sorry job for Eli, who foresaw that it might cost him much money and more trouble. But he was not so brutal a person as many believed. He had not meant to hurt the boy so badly, and, dead or alive, he could not leave him where he lay.

Mrs. Eli Badger was washing the supper dishes at the kitchen sink, and Miss Lydia Badger (aged seventeen) was wiping them, by the light of a kerosene lamp, when the door was burst open, and in came the husband and father bearing his burden.

The shock of the spectacle, as the lamp-light shone on Kit's insensible form and bleeding nose, cost the family a plate, which escaped from Miss Lydia's hand and fell clattering to the floor. Mrs. Badger threw up her dish-rag and ejaculated:—

“The land! What's the matter?”

“I've hit a boy I ketched hooking grapes,” said

Eli. "I'm 'fraid he's hurt. Make room on the lounge there!"

"Merthy thak'th! Who ith it?" said Lydia—a plump young lady with very light banded hair, a fair, full face, and a lisp.

"I haint the least idee," said Eli. "Don't stan' starin', but bring your camfire-bottle quick!"

This last remark was addressed to Mrs. Badger, as any one acquainted with the family might have known by the tone of voice. Eli had a mild way of speaking to his daughter, and a harsh way of addressing his wife, which revealed much concerning his domestic relations.

"Do you know him? I thought prob'ly you might."

This was uttered in the gentle voice, and Lydia answered accordingly:—

"No, I don't believe I ever theen him before. What made you thrike him tho hard, pa? He'th too nithe a looking boy to be thtealing grapeth!"

She was tenderly wiping the stains from Kit's face, when a faint voice, half-muffled by the wet napkin she was using, startled them, almost as if the dead had spoken.

"I wasn't stealing grapes!"

It was the voice of Kit, reviving without the aid

of the "camfire-bottle," which the frightened Mrs. Badger was just then hurriedly bringing; the wet napkin having quickened his breath and fetched him out of his swoon.

Thereupon Eli forgot his terrors, and remembered his wrath.

"Wa'n't stealin' grapes!" he repeated, as soon as he saw by Kit's opening eyes that the worst danger was over. "What was ye at my trellises fer?"

Kit sat up with some difficulty, and lifted his hand with a vague and unhappy notion that the head on his shoulders belonged to somebody else, and that it was sadly in need of repairs. He dropped his arm quickly, however, with a twinge of the part that had come in contact with the Badger cudgel, and sat staring in a feeble and sickly way at Eli, on one stout knee before him, at Miss Badger with her sympathetic face and flaxen hair, and lastly at Mrs. Badger, thrusting an impertinent bottle at his nose.

Then he made a faint effort to explain.

"I was coming to find you,—if this is Mr. Badger,"—as Kit, judging by the square build of the man, believed him to be. "Please don't!"

This querulous appeal was addressed to the holder of the bottle, the powerful odor of whose contents gave his nostrils a most unpleasant surprise.

"That's my name. What did you want of me, if not grapes?" said Eli, incredulous.

Kit answered in broken sentences.

"I was at the oyster saloon. In the village. I heard some young fellows talk of robbing your trellises. To-night. I thought you ought to know."

So saying, he put up his hand again, still curious to know what there was so peculiar about the head he was carrying.

In answer to Eli's questions, he told all he could remember, or had strength to repeat, of the conversation he had overheard.

"And you whacked him over the head when he wath comin' to give you warning!" exclaimed the excited Lydia. "If that aint jutht too awful thad!"

"Of course, I took him for a thief, himself," said the father, in his mild voice — "comin' on to the premises that way!"

"What a drefle mistake!" murmured Mrs. Badger.

"What do you know about it, whether 't was a mistake or not?" growled the husband in his gruff voice. "I ketched him at my grapes. And I struck him. Though I didn't mean ter strike him quite so hard. How do I know now but what he was helpin' himself, or goin' to?"



"It was the blundering Christopher who had fallen." Page 189.

He turned again to Christopher.

"What did you run fer, if you was comin' to see me?"

"You frightened me," said Kit. "Besides, I didn't know it was you. And I didn't know that you would know that I —"

Here he put up his hand again to that bothersome head of his.

"Where do you feel hurt?" asked the compassionate Lydia.

"My head. And my shoulder, I guess. And my — I don't know; I feel bad all over," murmured Kit, looking very pale, and sinking over on the lounge.

"Bathe his head in the camfire," suggested the wife.

"Why don't ye do it, and not stan' talkin' o' doin' it?" cried the surly voice of Eli.

"Hadn't we better thend for the doctor?" hinted the daughter.

"I'll see, bum-by; I guess he'll come out on't; I hope he will," the amiable voice made answer. "If he was comin' to find me, why in the name of Gath didn't he come in the front way?"

At that, Kit roused up again.

"I thought the lane was the front way. I didn't see any other. I never was here before."

Miss Lydia arranged a shawl under Kit's shoulders, and he lay on the lounge, tranquil but very pale, while Mrs. Badger bathed the rapidly swelling bunch she found on his organ of self-esteem.

"Where's my cap?" he faintly inquired.

"Here 'tith," replied Lydia. "It dropped off ath pa wath bringing you into the houthe."

Eli had risen and was walking the room, while his wife and daughter attended the sufferer.

"If ye was re'ly comin' to give me warnin'," said he, "I regret I was so hasty; I'd like to take back that last blow."

"I'd like to have you take 'em all back!" murmured Kit, with a pallid smile, his sense of the humorous asserting itself in the midst of his weakness and pain, "and keep 'em for those fellows!"

"I've been pestered to death by boys hookin' my fruit," Eli went on, in self-defence. "You wouldn't wonder 't I git mad sometimes! It's hard to ketch 'em at it; and if I do once, they're full of their humbug excuses—innocent as babes! T'other evenin' one come walkin' right in among the vines where I was keepin' watch, and two others after him. I riz right up from where I was settin', and faced him. Did he run? Nary step! But jes' 's I was goin' to grab him, he looks me cool in the face and says,

‘Good evenin’, Mr. Badger! We’ve called to see if you’ll be willin’ to sell us a few bushels of your nice grapes, when they git ripe; we don’t suppose they’re quite ripe enough to pick yit.’ They’d have thought they was ripe enough if I hadn’t been there. But what could I do but give ’em a piece of my mind? I’ve regretted ever since ’t I didn’t give ’em a whalin’! Mabby I gin it to the wrong one, when I gin it to you,” he said, pausing and looking down at Christopher. “But how do I know this story ’bout your comin’ to warn me aint of a piece with their pretence about wantin’ to buy?”

Kit had experienced so much trouble lately in getting people to accept his explanations that he had not a heart to answer. He said, however, rather stolidly, after a pause:—

“You needn’t believe me; but if you find your grapes gone in the morning, perhaps you’ll wish you had.”

“I shall keep watch,” said Eli, with a peculiarly grim expression of the square-set jaws turned toward the lamp-light. “Who be ye, any way? Where do ye live?”

“My name is Christopher Downimede, and I live in East Adam.”

“East Adam! That’s a long way off! What’s your business around here?”

"I'm on my way home from Peaceville," Kit answered. He did not deem it a favorable moment to introduce the horse question.

"Been to the cattle-show?" said Eli.

"Yes, I have," replied Christopher.

"I was there yesterday," Mr. Badger resumed. "I got some grapes and pears on exhibition which had oughter take prizes. 'Taint much of a show; it's all runnin' to hoss-racin', late years."

Lydia smiled to see her father so civil to the young stranger, whose hurts she was nursing. He was rarely so gracious to anybody but her.

"Seems to me you come out o' your way considerable," he added.

"I had a little business this way," Kit replied.

"Didn't expect to git to East Adam to-night, did ye?"

"No; I was going to stay in the village back here. But I thought I ought to come—and tell you—about the grape-thieves."

His voice faltered; he looked as if he was going to faint again. Miss Lydia regarded him with tenderest concern.

"He won't have to go away from here to-night, will he?" she appealed to her papa. "I don't thee how he can!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RIGHT HORSE.

ELI BADGER was still averse to calling the doctor, but he did not see that he could do less for the boy he had given so gratuitous a beating than to put him to bed in his own house. The bed was accordingly prepared, and Kit was weary and weak enough to fall asleep almost as soon as Eli had helped him into it.

"He got a pooty hard hit, that's a fact!" said the dealer of the blows, as he returned to the kitchen.

"Ith he any worthe? Are you going for the doctor?" Lydia inquired, seeing him put on his hat and button his coat.

"He don't want no doctor," said the soft side of Eli. "I'm goin' for Mahoney."

Mahoney was his hired man, who lived a little farther up the street.

"To get him to watch with you?" Mrs. Badger meekly asked.

"What else do you s'pose I want him fer, this time o' night?" the hard side of him sharply responded.

"You go to bed, you two, and never mind about me. Have the lights out by nine o'clock, any way. There'll be fun by moonlight, 't about 'leven, if this boy tells the truth."

"Of courthe he tellth the truth; anybody can thee that," said Lydia. "I hope you won't whack the wrong perthon again."

"No danger this time!" replied the father, with an ugly look, which was not meant for the daughter.

"And don't hit quite so hard, I wouldn't!" pleaded Mrs. Badger.

"What business is't of yours how hard I hit?" snapped the husband, with a still more ugly look, which was meant for the wife. "Hold your tongue, if you can't talk sense!"

With this parting advice he went out of the house, and did not return to it until midnight.

Kit awoke the next morning with a sore head, a lame shoulder, and a stunned and dizzy feeling which recalled, disagreeably, his adventure of the evening before. He lay thinking it over, and wondering what he should do about Dandy—at the same time gazing listlessly at the odd figures on the wall-paper of Mrs. Badger's best room—when Mr. Badger walked in.

The square-visaged, broad-backed worthy was in

his most amicable frame of mind. He inquired for Kit's health, and said cheeringly :—

"Got along pooty well 'ithout a doctor, hey? Wa'n't hurt so very bad, after all, was ye?"

"I shouldn't care to be hurt much worse, unless I wanted to put my friends to the trouble of a funeral," Kit replied, with a smile of feeble pleasantry.

"Wal!" said Eli, with a grin of satisfaction, "that's a toler'ble stiff stick I thumped ye with, no mistake! You should 'a' come in t' other way. But ye meant it fer a favor to me; and '*twas* a favor."

"Did they come for the grapes?" Kit was eager to know.

Eli Badger indulged in a sinister laugh.

"They did! They was true to their app'intment. They come with a one-hoss team and baskets and boxes prepared to jest clean my vineyard out. But me and my man was on hand. We'd been hid fer nigh onto two hours, and had had a pooty lonesome time on 't, when we heard somebody come 'round reconn'iterin', an' bum-by a wagon stopped jest a little ways down the street."

"Farther than the corner of the lane?" said Kit.

"Yes; some rods. If it had stopped there, it

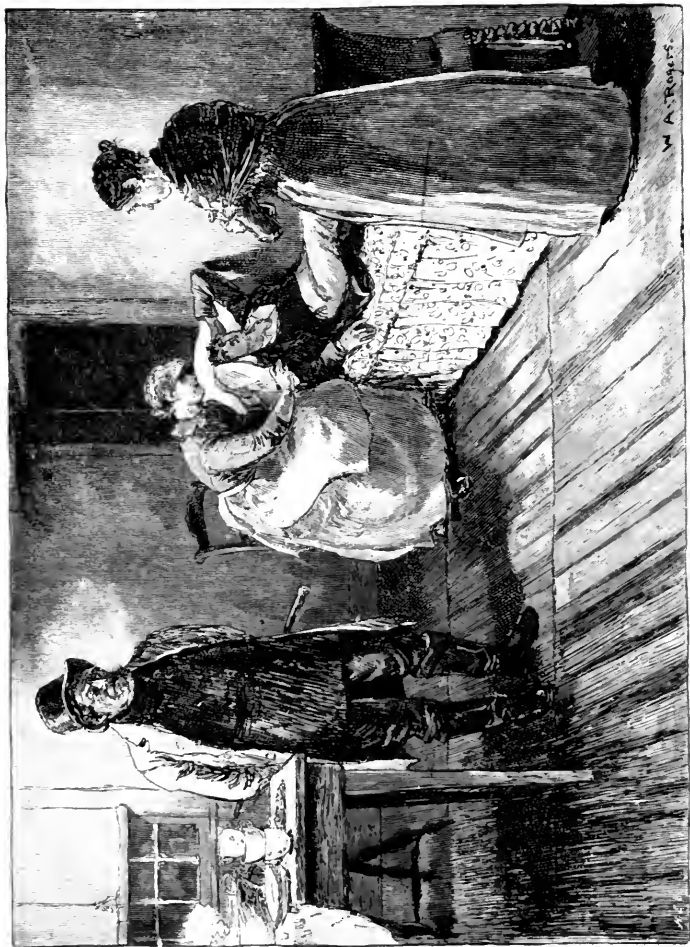
wouldn't have got off ; I was hid by the fence, on the watch fer 't. As 'twas, we gin our 'tention to the rascals ; waited till they got well to pickin', then rushed out on 'em." Eli chuckled grimly. "'Twas moonlight. You sh'd 'a' been there to see the fun ! You've no idee on 't !"

"Yes, I have," said Kit, remembering his share in some very similar fun a few hours earlier, and imagining the surprise it must have been to the rogues when the ponderous Eli made his onset. "Catch anybody ?"

"I knocked one down, and my Irishman grabbed him. Then I thumped another and grabbed him, and I might have disabled a third, if I hadn't been afraid o' strikin' too hard with that stick ; my over-doin' the thing with you had learnt me a lesson ! He got off with the wagon. We done pooty well, though. We got two baskets and a bushel box, 'sides our prisoners ; and I know who they all be."

"What did you do with the two you caught ?" Kit asked.

"Marched 'em down town, found a watchman, and had 'em locked up," said Eli. "I'll have out warrants for the others this mornin', and make things lively for the whole lot. I'm much obliged to *you* !" he added, with hearty emphasis.



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"I'd like to take back that last blow." Page 196.

"You are quite welcome, I am sure," murmured Kit.

Just then came a little rap at the door, and Miss Badger's lisp was heard.

"Breakfath, pa! Can he come? I 've got hith ham and eggth a-cooking."

"Come, can't ye?" said Eli. "Ye'll feel more chipper after you've got suthin' warm into yer stomach; don't ye b'lieve ye will? Guess ye will!"

"I hope so. I'll try," Kit answered, bestirring himself.

He had already made two or three attempts to rise, and had once got as far as his elbows, but had sunk back again with a faint and giddy sensation. The stout-limbed Eli, full of kindly and hospitable feelings for his guest, now came to his assistance; and the boy, sitting up, got his bare feet upon the painted floor; then carefully rested his weight upon them.

"I shall be all right after a while," he said. "Don't keep your breakfast waiting for me."

"It can wait as well as not," replied Eli. "We're in no hurry this mornin'. My Irishman, after bein' up half the night, won't be around for an hour or two. And I've nothin' to do but to look after our grape-stealers. Can I do anything more fer ye?"

"Nothing," said Kit, glad to be left alone.

He limped to the wash-stand, and felt refreshed after a free use of cold water about his head and neck. Then he stood before the little square looking-glass, by a small dressing-table covered with a white cloth, and with Mrs. Badger's best hair-brush and comb completed his toilet; wincing as he arranged the locks carefully about that part of his cranium which had been visited by the hickory stick.

He found the breakfast waiting for him, and sat down with the family, feeling already much more comfortable in body and cheerful in mind than when he awoke.

Two or three circumstances, however, interfered with his perfect enjoyment of a plain, substantial meal. He would have been better pleased if Eli had not flooded his plate so profusely as he did with fat gravy. He would also have much preferred that Mr. Badger should not constantly snub Mrs. Badger in his presence, making him feel crushed and uncomfortable on her account. The lady, however, seemed acclimated, so to speak, to her husband's torrid temper, and really to mind it less than Kit minded it for her.

Then there were some not very agreeable things about the otherwise charming Lydia. She seemed

to take her father's treatment of her mother as a matter of course, no doubt thinking it fully atoned for by his gentler manner towards herself. With her full, fair features, and flaxen hair—long and flying behind, but combed straight down in front, and cut precisely from ear to ear across the eyebrows, completely concealing her forehead, if she had one,—she sat opposite their guest, and seemed much of the time quite oblivious of her breakfast, in the interest she took in his own.

Kit disliked to be stared at when he was eating, especially by a young lady with banged hair. She not only stared; she stared admiringly; and whenever he looked up, as he could not help doing now and then, fascinated by her gaze, her large, blue eyes and full, red, open lips encouraged him with a sweet smile.

Another thing tended to dampen the ardor of Kit's attack on the ham and eggs,—the thought of Dandy.

There was much talk at table about the grape-thieves, Eli relating over and over again how he had lain in ambush and rushed out upon them with his club, capturing or putting them to flight. At length, shoving back his chair, he remarked that he must drive to the village and see about swearing out warrants for them, the first thing.

"You better not be in a hurry about leavin' us," he said to the guest. "Stay and git recruited a little."

He put on his hat and was going to the barn, when Kit rose to follow him.

"I think I should like to—to go out—and look at your horses and stock," he said, glancing around, "if I could find my cap."

"Here'tith!" said Lydia, bringing it with alacrity

Eli waited for him to put it on, which Kit did cautiously, wearing it well on the back of his head to favor his painfully enlarged bump of self-esteem; and the two went out together.

"Now don't you see how you blundered?" said Mr. Badger, showing the lane and the way into the lower part of it from the back door of the house. "If you'd come down further, you'd have been all right, though the front way 'd 'a' been better. Lane, ye see, goes straight to the cattle-yard."

The cattle-yard surrounded the barn, and at the end of the barn was the stable, the door of which stood broadly open. Kit, as he entered with Eli, and heard the sound of horses champing in their stalls, felt his bosom swell with intense expectation.

"I lost a hoss a week ago," Mr. Badger remarked, taking a curry-comb from a corner brace of the

building. "One of the best hosses I ever owned. Broke his leg gitt'n' it through a hole in the bridge. Had to knock him on the head. Town'll have to pay the damages, or I miss my ca'c'lation. Whoa! stan' round!"

He slapped the hip of the first horse with his comb, and, passing into the stall, undid his halter.

"I bought a new one to take his place, day 'fore yis'day. Had a chance to buy cheap, over to Peaceville, to the cattle-show. Back, ye brute!"

Kit held his breath; it seemed to him that the slightest thing might burst his hope like a bubble, and awaken him from an illusion.

Eli tied the halter to a staple in the rear of the stalls, and began to curry the animal.

"Good trade as ever I made," he said, between strokes of the comb. "I thought fust there might be suthin' wrong about him, he was offered so cheap. But I know a good hoss when I see it; and I know a broken-winded, spavined, ring-boned, glandery beast when I see it. None o' them things about this critter!"

"I — should — think — not," breathed Kit, almost too excited to speak above a whisper, and forgetting all his hurts and pains in the fearful joy of the moment.

CHAPTER XXIV.

KIT IS INVITED TO RIDE.

"I COULDN'T tell if he balked till I tried him," Eli Badger went on, full of the satisfaction inspired by his excellent bargain. "But I can't find that he's got that fault, either. Stan' round, you brute!"

The horse "stood around" again, turning toward Christopher, in the broad light of the open door, his peculiarly marked, mottled side.

"There might have been something wrong in the man's title to him," the boy suggested, with more confidence in his tones of voice.

"I thought of that," said Eli. "But he told a pooty straight story. Had to take him for a debt, and was obliged to turn him into money. 'Twas a good chance, any way ; I wanted jes' such a hoss, and I thought I'd take the resk. If anybody's got a better claim to him now than I've got, he'll have to prove it, that's all. Stan' round ! will ye?"

Kit observed the crinkles that had not yet dis-

appeared from the lately braided foretop, and said, as carelessly as so intensely interested a boy could:—

“Suppose a man with a claim on him should—happen along?”

“What ‘u’d I do?” said Eli. “What ‘u’d any man, that *is* a man, do in my place? I’d hold on to him as long as I could, sure as Gath! Anybody ‘t knows me ‘ll tell ye that.”

“I suppose so,” faltered Christopher. “But you might be putting yourself to a good deal of trouble and expense.”

“Like enough; but I’d be puttin’ *him* to a good deal of trouble and expense at the same time. That way I might force him to a compromise. ‘Here,’ says I, ‘s a hoss wuth a hundr’d and forty dollars. You’ve lost him; I’ve bought him. Gi’ me half that amount o’ money and take him.’ I’ll git back what he cost *me*, anyhow, if an owner *does* come along and prove property,—which aint at all likely,” added Eli, plying his comb.

“Going to drive him this morning?” Kit softly inquired.

“No; I drove him yis’d day; guess I’ll drive t’other one this mornin’. Thought I’d rub him down, though, and see how he looks. Stan’ round, I say!

Mighty likely hoss that, now," said Eli, "for seventy dollars!"

"I should think he was well worth twice that, as you say," replied Christopher.

"I b'lieve he is," said Mr. Badger, "if he's wuth a penny. Oh, I got a good bargain when I got him!"

The other horse was then curried and harnessed, and Eli, telling Kit to make himself "to home" and "git recruited," rode off to see about "fixin' the grape-thieves," leaving Dandy Jim in the stall.

Kit went out and looked about the place, trying to calm his excitement and determine what he should do. Then he went back and feasted his hungry eyes on Dandy Jim once more. There could not possibly be any mistake about the identity of the horse. He had all Dandy's characteristic marks; he carried himself like Dandy, he looked like him out of the eyes, and he was shod behind and not before.

The boy studied him a long while, then strolled up the lane, and looked off in the direction Eli had gone, all the while struggling with a great temptation.

He was startled from his reveries by a lisping voice in the vineyard.

"Don't you want to get thome grapeth? I think you detherve thome, after latht night!" And the

face of the fair Lydia looked over at him sweetly from its frame of flaxen hair.

He accepted the invitation, but instead of climbing the fence as on the night before, went around by the passage between the house and the cattle-yard. Lydia met him, and picked for him the finest clusters she could find. He thanked her, and, wishing to be alone, made off again toward the stable.

She followed him, however, with her hands full of lovely Delawares and Concords, which she ate herself, and continued urging upon him.

"I gueth you're fond of hotheth!" she remarked, seeing how absent-mindedly he let his longing eyes wander in the direction of the stalls.

Kit confessed that circumstances had caused him lately to take a lively interest in those useful animals.

"My father got a futht-rate one for a mere thong, two or three dayth ago," she said, plucking grapes one by one from a bunch, and blowing the skins from her lips after she had sucked them. "Have you theen him?"

"Your father showed him to me," replied Kit. "He's a pretty fair-looking horse. Is he easy under the saddle?"

"I don't know," said Lydia. "I never ride hoth-back; do you?"

"Sometimes; once in a great while," Kit answered, dryly.

"Do you like it?" she asked, turning her beaming face full upon him, while she squeezed a plump Concord into her moist ripe lips.

"Yes, if I don't have too much of it at once," he replied, negligently sucking the last of his Delawares.

"Pa'th got a thaddle thomewhere," she went on, as they stood in the stable-door. "You can take a little ride, if you think you would fanthy it."

Here was his temptation again, in a more terrible form even than at first. Once on Dandy's back, with Miss Badger's smiling acquiescence, starting off for a little ride, would he be able to stop before he had got him once more safe in Uncle Gray's front yard?

He saw himself riding triumphantly through East Adam village, waving his cap at his mother as she ran to the door or window in answer to his gleeful call; and finally astonishing Uncle and Aunt Gray, as he swung himself from Dandy's back at their door. And what was to prevent him from taking Duckford and Maple Park on his way?

But could he repay Miss Badger's kindness by such an act of seeming treachery? Strange as it

may appear, her tempting proposal made it still more difficult for him to take possession of Dandy in an underhand way.

He had tried his hand once at stealing him, — for he remembered how much it had seemed like stealing when he was betrayed into acting against the dictates of his conscience by Brunlow's persuasive cunning. Would it seem less like it now, to secure his uncle's property by fraud or force, with or without Lydia's innocent co-operation?

He could imagine her parting smiles, as she saw him set off for his "little ride"; then the growing solicitude with which she would watch for his return; her anxiety becoming alarm as the conviction was gradually forced upon her mind that, if not a grape-thief, their youthful honest-seeming guest was what was worse, — a horse-thief in disguise! Then he could foresee Eli's rage on coming home and learning what had been done in his absence.

"Thank you," said Kit, hesitatingly; "I don't think — I care — to ride."

He had mastered the temptation in its most enticing shape. And surely the proposed exercise was not such a novelty to him just then that he should desire merely to be jounced up and down by a hard-trotting horse.

"I thuppothe you don't feel like it tho thoon after latht night," said the sympathizing Lydia.

"I'm afraid it would be a little too much for my nerves," — meaning his good resolution, — he replied, in a regretful tone.

"I'm thorry!" said Lydia, sweetly. "I'd be tho glad to thee you have a nithe ride!"

CHAPTER XXV.

“A JUSTIFIABLE STRATAGEM.”

THOUGH much had been gained by the discovery of Dandy in responsible hands, Kit could not easily forego the satisfaction of taking him home, and saving his uncle much future trouble and loss in recovering his property.

Having abandoned the idea of “stealing” him, he began to meditate a different and hardly less audacious plan of accomplishing his purpose without letting him go out of his sight. This he proceeded to put into practice on Eli’s return from the village.

Eli was in excellent spirits—much better than he would have been in, Kit thought, if he had come home to find that his visitor had galloped away on his new horse. He had obtained evidence corroborating Kit’s story of the presence of the fruit-thieves in the oyster-saloon the evening before; all had been identified, and warrants were out for those not already in custody.

Mr. Badger appeared, consequently, well disposed toward one who had done him so important a service, and been soundly cudgelled by him in the performance of it. Kit, therefore, found it easy to say:—

“Don’t you want to harness up your other horse this afternoon, and take me home?”

“Must ye be goin’?” said Eli.

“I think so. But I’m not able to walk very far. I’ll willingly pay you for your trouble.”

“Sence ’t was my business that brought ye here, and my stick that welcomed ye,” said Eli, with a grin, “I s’pose I can afford to carry ye home for nothin’. I’d oughter, I guess, under the circumstances.”

Lydia was disappointed to learn that their guest was to leave them so soon.

“Though, if he mutht go,” she said, approvingly, to her papa, “of courthe you’d oughter tackle up and take him home.”

Kit trembled lest Mrs. Badger should also approve of the plan, and so turn her husband against it. But having lately received some dispiriting rebuffs from the conjugal side of his nature, she fortunately kept quiet.

The boy still had doubts about the right horse

being chosen for the expedition ; and after dinner he went out to watch the harnessing, with the greatest solicitude. Lydia came tripping after, and whispered something in her father's ear. The paternal part of him uttered a gentle growl of assent, and she ran back into the house.

Kit was too deeply absorbed in the horse question to give much heed to her at the time, notwithstanding the significant nod and sweet smile with which she favored him, glancing over her plump shoulder as she retired. He hardly dared utter a word until assured by Eli's movements that Dandy was to be driven that afternoon. Nor did he volunteer any remarks even then, being fearful of betraying his unbounded satisfaction.

He noticed that Mr. Badger put a second seat into the open buggy, as if it had been necessary for a man of his bulk to have the forward seat entirely to himself. Kit's eyes took the measure of the broad back, and was carrying it along for comparison with the capacity of the seat, when the meaning of Lydia's secret errand and parting smile suddenly dawned upon him.

His conjecture was confirmed when he saw her presently come out of the house, in hat and mantilla, putting on a torn kid glove, with a parasol under her arm.

"I'm going with you ; did you know it?" she said, with a happy glance at Christopher. "I thuppothe you won't object."

"Why should I?" replied Kit.

He was not, however, supremely delighted with the arrangement ; not for any reason personally uncomplimentary to the fair Lydia, but because he deemed it just possible that Eli, if he drove Dandy Jim to his owner's premises, might not have him to drive home again. In that case, Miss Badger's presence in the wagon, at the farther end of the journey, might add to Mr. Badger's embarrassment, and prove a fruitful source of unpleasantness.

He would have been glad to say good-by to Mrs. Badger, who had been kind to him, and for whom, in her down-trodden state, he felt much sympathy. But as he was starting toward the house for that purpose, Eli called him back.

"Sayin' good-by to *her* aint of no consequence," he grumbled, in something like his marital tone of voice. "We must be off. It's a long drive to your place," he added, arranging the reins.

"The longer the better!" whispered Lydia, as Kit helped her into the buggy.

"Jump in," said Eli, seeing Kit hesitate. "Better



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take the hind seat with Lyddie; there'll be more room."

"Aint it jeth' thplendid?" she laughed, opening her parasol as Kit took his seat beside her.

"It suits *me!*" he replied, with a rather stern smile, thinking of the glory of returning to his uncle's behind the stolen horse, after all his blunders and tribulations.

Then, as the vineyard was passed, where he had met with his latest mishaps, and the homeward road was struck at a brisk trot, he could hardly keep from laughing at the grouty and unobliging Eli himself being induced to go with him and drive Dandy home to his lawful owner.

Lydia chatted and lisped vivaciously, as they rode along the country highways in the mild September weather. Eli bragged of his new horse, and named extravagant prices for him, increasing his figures as Dandy quickened his paces; the horse appearing to be aware of Kit's presence and of the fact that he was headed for home.

"If a horse could speak," thought Kit, "he might have spoilt my fun by neighing out when he first saw me this morning: 'Hello! That you, Kit? Where did you come from?'"

As it was, how little did Eli suspect the familiar

acquaintance of boy and horse, or dream of the disagreeable surprise in store for him !

Kit had not, from the first, been quite at ease in his mind regarding the deception he was practising. And we have seen how Miss Badger's proposal to add her plumpness to the load had cast an equivalent weight upon his conscience. But once on his way home, he silenced his scruples and indulged in jubilant thoughts of his well earned triumph.

"I'm not going home without Dandy Jim, after all ! Once there, I'll leave Eli Badger and Uncle Gray to 'settle the hash,' as uncle would say. Won't it be fun to stand by and see two such men glare at each other and contradict and fling adjectives over Dandy's back ! Uncle's a match for Eli at that business ; and he'll have the inside track, — his own horse on his own ground, and plenty of witnesses to prove property."

Kit chuckled at his own shrewdness, which he flattered himself was sufficient to atone for many blunders. Instead of the bungling operation of carrying evidence to Southmere and securing Dandy by legal process, here was the horse himself trotting comfortably back to East Adam and the premises where he belonged, from which not even Eli could venture

to take him by violence after the owner's claim was duly shown.

Who could say that it was not a justifiable stratagem? Yet the more certain it seemed of success, the more seriously Kit began to consider the other side of the question. If it would have been wrong to ride Dandy off surreptitiously in the morning, as he had been tempted to do, could the device he was now employing be altogether right?

"Eli will be mad enough to finish what the stick left of me last night," he thought. "And Lydia! What a traitor I shall appear in her eyes; taking advantage of their kindness in this way!"

For he felt that they had been really kind; nor could he pretend that all they were doing for him was justly his due for the blows of the hickory club the night before; remembering that it was quite as much to serve his own purpose as to befriend Eli that he blundered into the vineyard, to his hurt.

"I shall feel better," he reasoned, "if he will take pay for carrying me now. That will make it seem more like a fair transaction. He can't say then that he walked into my trap simply by way of doing me a favor. If I hire him, there's no favor about it; it's just a matter of business."

He waited for a good chance to introduce the

subject; then, putting his hand into his pocket, remarked:—

“You haven’t yet told me, Mr. Badger, what I am to pay you for this ride.”

“What you’re to pay?” said Eli. “Yes, I told ye. Noth’n’. That’s what I said, wa’n’t it?”

“Thertain it wath,” declared Lydia. “Put up your money. Do, pleathe!”

“But I can’t let you—” Kit began to remonstrate.

“You’ll have to let me,” said Eli. “What I say I stick to. What I’m doin’ fer you now, I aint doin’ fer no money. I’m doin’ it coz you done me a good turn, and coz I’ve took a notion to ye.”

Kit still insisted, but found Eli Badger as obstinate in the performance of a friendly action as he had the reputation of being in the more selfish concerns of life. The boy was at length obliged to put up his money, which, however, burned in his pocket, and proved an added burden to his soul.

Was it not, after all, a mean sort of trick he had resorted to, and would not an open, honest course have been better? What a return for Eli’s goodness in carrying him home, to take away his horse when they should get there!

“As if the loss of the money he had paid for him

wouldn't be enough," thought Christopher, "without so much extra trouble!"

He was not a boy to regard a matter of this sort very long from an exclusively selfish point of view. He had the spirit to perceive that Eli, too, had a side, and that there was a medium ground of honor and justice. He was fearful of committing another blunder in the business, which had been too fruitful of blunders already; and yet it seemed to him, before they had made half the journey, that he ought to tell Eli what was before him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

KIT MAKES A CONFESSION.

KIT grew strangely absent-minded, in the midst of Lydia's pleasant chatter, and at last she became silent. Then Eli remarked:—

"Seems to me you took a deal of pains to go to the cattle-show, seein' there's no railroad direct from your place."

"Yes, I did; pains enough!" assented Christopher. "I don't think I should care to go again, in just the same way."

"It's a long ja'nt," said Eli, "fer a boy like you. Didn't walk all the way, did ye?"

"I walked, when I wasn't lucky enough to get rides," replied Kit.

"I should think 't would have took ye about all day to git over there and back to my place, let alone seein' the show," Mr. Badger remarked.

"I didn't—see much of it—the second day," faltered Kit.

"What! ye wa'n't there both days, was ye?" said Eli, turning half around, and showing his

square-built visage, in some surprise. "I wan' to know! Didn't see me there the fust day, did ye!"

Kit could not remember that he had enjoyed that pleasure.

"Wal, I was off the last half of the afternoon," Eli resumed, "raisin' money to pay fer this nag. I come pooty nigh missin' my chance of buyin' him, after all. Mighty glad I didn't! How d'ye like the way he gits over the road? G'lang!" cracking his whip. "Aint nothin' very bad about him, is the'?"

"I haven't seen a horse lately that I'd sooner be riding after," replied Christopher.

"Ner I!" chuckled Eli. "I didn't git back to the show till 't was jes' breakin' up, after the racin' was over; the feller 't I'd bargained with had got tired o' waitin', and had harnessed him into a wagon in place o' somebody's hoss that had been stole. Ye might 'a' heard about that if you'd stayed late enough. Some Duckford boys had lost their animal, and they made a big pow-wow about it."

"I must have left the ground just before the—pow-wow, as you call it," suggested Kit.

"They wanted me to lend 'em this hoss, to foller up their'n with; but I wanted to be gittin' home, to look after my grapes," said Eli. "I had him out of their harness in about forty winks, and left 'em to

shift for themselves. 'T wa'n't none o' my business to hunt for their lost hoss. Some said a little feller in a white cap had jest rid him away."

Kit, in his base-ball cap, which had once been white, sat silent, thinking Eli might at any moment look around again and connect him with the adventure he was relating. Lydia was smiling upon him, as unsuspicious of his secret as if she had been accustomed to seeing such caps every day.

"Where'd ye stop over night?" Eli inquired. "They say the' aint no good public-house in Peaceville sence the temperance folks shet up the bars."

"I went home to my uncle's to spend the night," Kit replied.

"Home to East Adam?" exclaimed Mr. Badger. "You don't say! I shouldn't 'a' thought you'd done that if you wanted to be to the cattle-show the second day."

"I had a chance to ride," Kit explained, thinking what a ride it was, on the wrong horse! "And I thought my uncle's folks—for some reasons—would be anxious to see me."

He could hardly resist the impulse he felt to relate then and there the whole story of the horse the unconscious Eli was driving with such unalloyed

satisfaction. But while he was considering how to begin, Lydia changed the subject by inquiring: "What maketh you live with your uncle'th folkth? Ith it a good home?"

"As good as I deserve, I suppose," said Kit, with rueful recollections of his recent troubles. "I have to work for my living, and I may as well do it there as anywhere. Though I'm not sure I shall stay much longer."

"Why tho?" Lydia inquired.

Not knowing just what his uncle's final intentions would be regarding him, Kit answered cautiously that he had some intention of looking for a place that might suit him better.

"How would our plathe thuit you?" she asked. "I've heard pa thay many a time that he would like to engage a good thmart boy—young perthon," she corrected herself, with an admiring look at Christopher.

The thought of working for a man like Eli, of sitting daily at table with the Badger family, and witnessing poor Mrs. Badger's martyrdom, he did not find enticing. But he answered diplomatically:—

"I don't believe I am smart enough for him; I'm a fearfully stupid fellow!"

"You thupid!" laughed the incredulous Lydia.
"I gueth not! Ith he, pa?"

"I cal'late he's smart enough fer me," said Eli.
"I've been thinking on't myself. I want jes' such a boy; and if you'll come and try it with me fer a spell, and we both like, I'll pay you good wages."

"Oh, won't that be thplendid!" cried the enthusiastic Lydia.

Thinking it might be useful to hold this proposal in reserve, Kit answered discreetly:—

"You're very kind, considering how little you know me. But, of course, I can't say what I will do until I have talked with my mother and my uncle."

Lydia said, "I'm thertain we know you well enough!" while Eli meditated some moments before speaking what was in his mind.

"I'd like to have you come, fust rate. But how is it? Seems to me there can't be much work to do where you be, or else your uncle is a pooty indulgent sort of man, to let you go two days a-runnin' to the cattle-show."

The moment for freeing his mind and setting himself right with those whom he had so deceived,—that fatal moment seemed to Christopher to have arrived; and he answered unhesitatingly:—

"I had business in Peaceville, or I shouldn't have gone."

"Business?" queried Eli; "to take ye there two days a runnin'?"

"Yes," said Kit, "since I didn't quite succeed in it the first day."

"Didn't have anything on exhibition, your folks didn't, did they? You're in another county."

"We didn't exhibit anything; and yet"—Kit's voice trembled a little—"we had a horse there."

"How's that?" said Eli.

"I haven't told you," replied Kit, after a long breath, "that we—my uncle—had had a horse stolen, and I was in search of him."

Eli started. "A hoss stole?" he asked, giving a quick backward glance at the boy behind him.

"I traced him to Peaceville," Kit continued, in a voice which his utmost resolution failed to keep steady. "I found him under one of the cattle-sheds at the fair. But when I went to take him, I—I took another horse by mistake."

Eli turned still more completely, and gave Kit and his base-ball cap an astonished look.

"You!" he exclaimed. "Can't be you're the little feller in the white cap I heard 'em tellin' about!"

"I suppose I am," said Kit, losing color, but speaking firmly. "They thought I meant to steal the horse I took. But I didn't; and I took him back to Mr. Benting, in Duckford, yesterday, as I can show by a paper in Mr. Benting's own handwriting."

"That's a strange story!" growled Eli Badger.

"It 'th a perfect romanthe!" exclaimed Lydia, who did not yet see the full significance of it, as it dawned upon the dull paternal mind.

"What become of the hoss you was after?" Eli demanded, in the tone he was accustomed to use in addressing the miserable Mrs. Badger at home.

"I hope you found him!" said the sympathizing Miss Lydia.

"Hold your tongue! you don't know what you're talkin' about!" cried her father, forgetting, for once, to change the stop of his vocal organ, and turn on the sweet sounds she usually called forth. Then facing squarely about and glowering on Christopher: "Tell me about that hoss!"

"I got on his track again yesterday," Kit answered, not a little scared, but resolute still. "That, to be frank, Mr. Badger, was the business that took me so far out of the direct way home. The scamp had sold the horse to a man in your town, and I—"

Eli suddenly pulled rein.

"Look-a-here!" he exclaimed. "No nonsense with me! What sort of a hoss was he?"

Kit felt that the crisis had come. He answered with a frightened smile:—

"Very much such a horse as you are driving, Mr. Badger."

Eli stopped Dandy short and poised his whip.

"Is this the hoss?" he demanded.

"The very horse!" replied Christopher.

"Goodneth graciouth me!" almost shrieked the fair, the bewildered Lydia. "What a thingular cointhidenthe!"

"Singular!" snarled Eli. "Why didn't ye tell me this before?" looking savagely at Christopher, as if he would like to follow up with his whip (as poor Kit had anticipated) the little job his hickory stick had left incomplete the evening before.

"I ought to have done it," the boy hastened in some trepidation to explain. "But you gave me such a clubbing last night,—and told me this morning how you meant to hold on to the horse, spite of anybody,—I didn't believe—I knew I couldn't get him; and I thought the best way would be to get you—to hire you—for I wanted

to pay you, you know — to drive him over to my uncle's."

"Offered to pay me!" thundered Eli. "And didn't I refuse to take your money?"

"You did," said Kit. "And that decided me to tell you the truth before you went any farther."

"I'm thertain that wath real honorable!" interposed Lydia.

"Real fiddledee!" said the father, or perhaps we should say the husband of her mother, for the soft paternal Eli seemed to have hardened into stone. He reached back as if to clutch the boy who had so imposed upon his good-nature, muttering: "I've a good notion to pitch you heels over head out of this buggy!"

"Let me get out and save you the trouble," Kit responded, promptly.

"No, no!" pleaded Lydia, clasping his arm; "thit thtill! If he throwth you out, I'll get out too!"

"Let him stay, then, if he wants to!" said Eli, facing forward again, and seizing whip and reins.

"What are you going to do, pa?" screamed Lydia.

"I'm goin' to drive back home, fast as ever this hoss can snake us over the road, sure as Gath!"

said Eli, backing and cramping the buggy toward the wayside fence.

"Oh, pa!" she persisted, "can't you hear to reason?"

"Reason! Who's got any?" retorted Mr. Badger.

"I'll settle this little difficulty!" cried Kit, preparing to jump out.

"Oh, pa!" she continued, "thtop jutht a minute, for my thake! won't you? You'll be thorry if you don't! You know he aint able to walk!"

And detaining Christopher with the hand which held her parasol, she reached over with the other and made a snatch at the reins.

Eli stopped.

CHAPTER XXVII.

“WAL, F’R INSTANCE!”

WHILE Kit was getting his affairs into this fresh tangle, his mother was making a hurried journey on foot from East Adam village to Uncle Gray’s farm.

She had seen nothing of her son since that moonlight glimpse of him, when he rode to her door on the false Dandy’s back. She had grown anxious, waiting for him to come, as he had promised, and tell her the story of his wonderful adventure. And now rumors had reached her of the astounding error into which he had that night been betrayed, and of his starting off the next day, alone, to make such amends for it as he could, to the owners of both horses.

In great distress of mind she trudged to the farmhouse door. Her coming was observed; and with as cheerful a countenance as she could assume, but with apprehensions of an unpleasant scene, Aunt Gray admitted her brother’s widow.



There was still a faint odor of burnt stramonium and saltpetre in the house, showing that Uncle Gray, despite the fine weather, had not yet fully recovered from his asthmatic attack.

"Marier! Why, how do you do?" said Aunt Gray, affecting pleasurable surprise at sight of the widow.

But poor Mrs. Downimede had neither time nor breath to waste in fine phrases.

"What is this strange thing I hear?" she said, sinking upon a chair; "about my Christopher!"

"What! have you heard about that?" replied Aunt Gray, with a smile of broad pleasantry. "Well, he did make the funniest mistake! Do take off your things, won't you? And stop to tea."

But Kit's mother couldn't think of tea, nor of anything else, until she knew what had become of her boy. She sat, with her face sadly pale and worn in its frame of black crape, while Aunt Gray, dropping into an arm-chair opposite, proceeded, not without touches of humor, to describe Kit's curious misadventure.

"Just think of his comin' home here, proud as a kitten with her first mouse, and then findin', after all, that he'd brought another man's hoss! I declare it was too bad! and yet I couldn't help laughin', for

the life of me, when I come to think it over. But his uncle couldn't see anything comical in it. He took it about as hard as Christopher himself did. It went right to his bronichal tubes" (Aunt Gray meant *bronchial* tubes, I suppose), "along with the night air; and he has been strainin' at gnats and swallerin' camels ever sence."

"But where is he — where is Christopher?" the pale lips under the black crape inquired, with deep concern.

"You needn't be the least mite worried about Christopher," Aunt Gray replied, with an appearance of greater confidence than she perhaps felt. "I gave him money for his expenses, and he's a boy that can be trusted to take care of himself, for all his blunderin'."

"Take care of himself!" said a simmering voice; and Uncle Gray, hollow-chested and bent, with bristling iron-gray hair, and thin, hooked, sallow nose, looking more like a cheese-paring than ever, shuffled into the room. "If he can, I shall be glad to know it; for there's nothin' else under the canopy o' heaven he can be trusted to take care on."

"I'm so sorry!" said the widow, wiping her eyes. "He is heedless at times, I know. But he has many good qualities; that you must allow. There never

was a better boy to his mother than my Christopher. And I did hope — I did hope” — beginning to sob — “you would have a little patience with him !”

“Patience with him !” sizzled Uncle Gray. “Job himself couldn’t have patience — and continner to have — with such a dunderpate ! He would mislay the family Bible if he had the handlin’ on ’t ; or the barn door if ’t wa’n’t on hinges. Lucky his head is fast to his shoulders, or you might expect to see him go mopin’ around without it some mornin’, askin’ if anybody’d seen anything of his head !”

Uncle Gray ended with something between a whistle and a snort, intended for a sarcastic laugh.

“Well !” Aunt Gray interposed, soothingly, “it’s a pretty good head, if it does blunder sometimes. And it’s a still better heart the boy has ; nobody can find any fault with that. Don’t you go to bein’ discouraged about your son, Marier, for I aint. He’s pure gold all through ; no guilt nor tinsel about him. And he’ll turn out so, mark my word.”

“I know what he is,” said the widow. “I only wish I knew as well *where* he is at this moment, and had him back in our own little home once more. I never thought you would do such a thing as to let him go off alone, on a hunt for the stolen horse, in the first place. Still less would I have believed, —

after your promise to be a father to him, if he would come and live with you!—still less did I imagine you could be so unfeeling as to tell him he needn't come back without Dandy."

She gave Uncle Gray a reproachful look through her tears. He paced excitedly to and fro, his internal hornets' nests humming sonorously.

"Wal, wal!" he said, "I was provoked to death! So would anybody 'a' ben in my place. And, fact is, I *can't* have a boy around 't I can't rely on to look after things a little better; that's the long and short on't."

"I don't know what we're going to do," said the weeping widow. "And yet I do, too; Christopher must come back home,—if he ever comes back at all!—or find another place. And I can't bear—oh, I can't bear to have him go to strangers! What can we expect of them, since his own relatives are so hard upon him?"

"I never meant to be hard upon him, Sister Marier," replied Uncle Gray. "I been real kind to him, if I du say it! Leastwise I meant to be."

"I suppose so. And yet I can't understand!" murmured the widow. "After he had been off once, and had such bad luck, and you had learned how little he was to be trusted, I wonder you should

have let him start off again, — a mere boy so! — to hunt for your horse, or even to return the one he had brought home.”

“Truth is, I didn’t know what I was about. I was half crazy with the azmy. Otherwise, I’d no more ‘a’ done it than I’d — ”

Uncle Gray, still pacing to and fro, with his head down, over his hive of bees, stopped, and, lifting his eyes, looked from the window, as if in search of a metaphor strong enough for his purpose. But all at once he forgot that he wanted a metaphor; he forgot even to wheeze.

A two-seated open buggy, containing three persons, was driving into the yard. Aunt Gray noticed the changed expression of his face, and heard the sound of wheels; following his glance with her own, she saw a stout driver on the front seat and a young lady with a parasol behind.

“What strangers be them?” she exclaimed. “Gracious me, I must hurry and slick up a little!”

Uncle Gray stared at the horse, and buzzed out, “Dandy Jim! as I’m a livin’ bein’!”

The widow caught sight of a base-ball cap, and a smiling face partially eclipsed by the larger orb of Eli’s cloudy countenance, and exclaimed joyfully,

“ Christopher ! it’s Christopher ! it’s my boy come back ! ”

Christopher it was, indeed, with the real Dandy, and Mr. Badger and Miss Badger ; having accomplished at last, without guile, what he had once thought to do by artifice or stealth.

He had Lydia to thank for this happy result ; but for whose timely interference Eli would certainly have turned back from the point where we left them, and driven home in an unreasoning rage.

Despite her lisp, and the cut of her flaxen hair, and other things about her which Kit did not vastly fancy, she had at that crisis shown herself possessed of more good sense and firmness of purpose than he had given her credit for, during their brief acquaintance.

By her influence over her father, which even his anger could not long resist, she had compelled him to halt and listen ; then, encouraging Kit to remonstrate, she had helped him bring out the strong points in the case, and shake the resolution of the most obstinate of men.

If it was really a stolen horse he had bought, he could not expect to hold him, no matter how much money he had paid for him ; and a lawsuit would only add to his loss. Did he doubt Kit’s word, he

could prove it true or false by finishing the journey, then more than half accomplished. This would be the best thing to do, under any circumstances ; Kit agreeing that Eli should not be without a horse to drive home again, if he could help it.

Nor need he be so incensed with the boy, Lydia argued. It was not a very wicked stratagem he had used, and he had shown his honest intentions by confessing the truth about it before it was too late to turn back.

"If you had taken my money," he explained, "as I expected you would when we started, I should have felt I was doing right. But the more I thought of it, the worse it seemed, to take advantage of your kindness in that way. For you have really been kind !"

"We owed it to you, for latht night," said Lydia. "For though you wath hunting for your hoth, you wathn't obliged to come and tell uth about the grape-thtealerth."

"I am as sorry as anybody can be," Kit added, "that you have bought a horse of a man that had no right to sell him, and I am sorry to lose your friendship."

"Oh, you won't lothe that!" exclaimed Lydia. "I think more of you than ever."

"Don't never set up no claim agin to not bein' smart enough!" said Eli, with abundant negatives, his growl beginning to soften. "The' aint nothin' over 'n' above stupid about you, by Gath!"

More conversation of this sort had at length changed his determination; and here they were with Dandy at the door.

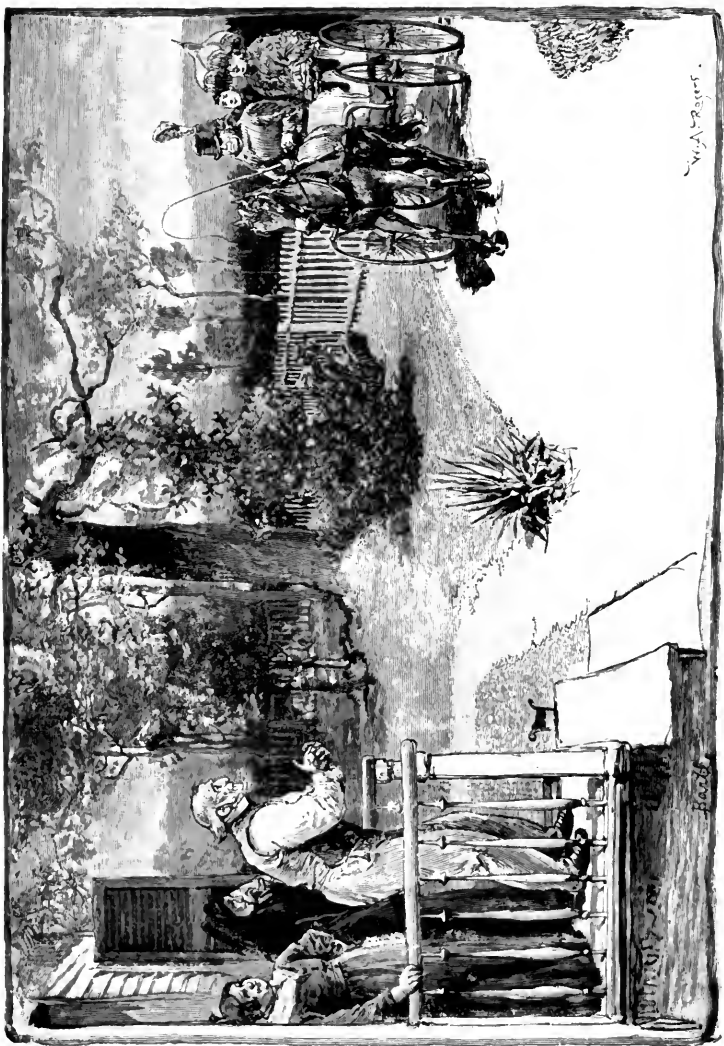
"Wal, f'r instance!" said Uncle Gray, rushing out as Kit was getting down from the buggy. "You've got the right hoss this time! Wal! wal! it's the beatermost thing you ever done yit!"

Surprise and joy had caused him to forget both his asthma and his hat, and in his eagerness to look Dandy over, he paid very little heed to Kit's companions. He opened the horse's mouth, he patted his neck, he stroked his shanks; then ran his finger through his own stiff upright forelock, and stood off a pace or two for a better view, again exclaiming gleefully:—

"Wal! wal! f'r instance!"

Meanwhile, somebody else was no less absorbed in Christopher, hugging and kissing him with laughter and tears, regardless of the eyes of strangers.

"This is my mother," said he, as soon as he could free himself, introducing her to Mr. and Miss Badger. "And this is my Aunt Gray. And Uncle Gray."





CHAPTER XXVIII.

"A GOOD OFFER."

AFTER witnessing the widow's reception of her son and the uncle's joy over the recovery of Dandy, Eli must have given them all credit for very good acting, indeed, if he doubted for a moment the entire truth of Kit's story. Even the horse gave signs of feeling himself at home again and of recognizing his master.

"'Xcuse me for not noticin' ye before," said Uncle Gray, putting up a husky palm to shake hands with Mr. Badger in the wagon. "I was struck all in a heap seein' my hoss agin."

Eli gave a not very good-natured grunt.

"If anybody's to be struck in a heap, seems 's though it's me," he said. "Your gain is my loss."

"How so? Where'd ye find him?" Uncle Gray turned upon Christopher. "How *did* ye bring it about?"

"It was Brunlow who stole him," Kit explained,

"and he sold him to this Mr. Badger for seventy dollars."

"Seventy gimcracks!" ejaculated Uncle Gray, aghast. "Any fool might know he's wuth twice that." He was thinking of Brunlow, but Eli applied the remark to himself.

"I did know it," he growled. "That's why I bought him. And mighty glad I am I didn't pay no more."

"To be sure," said Uncle Gray. "But didn't it occur to you that no honest man would want to sell an honest hoss like that for any such price?"

"I didn't know," said Eli, groutily. "He told a pooty straight story. I got took in, that's all."

"I should say, took in!" exclaimed Uncle Gray. "I know the knave, and I'm amazed that any man with common sense and eyes in his head shouldn't 'a' seen through him."

"Mabby I haint got common sense, and mabby I haint got eyes in my head," Eli muttered, with dull fire in the place where eyes should have been, if he had had any. "But I didn't expect this."

Kit hastened to interpose between the two men.

"I got on Dandy's track again yesterday in Peaceville, and followed him last night to Mr. Badger's place in Southmere. And to-day—he

has been very kind" — the boy's voice faltered a little — "he and Miss Badger have been so kind as to bring me home with Dandy. And I'm ever so much obliged to them."

"Certain! certain! so am I," said Uncle Gray. "Ever so much obliged! I'm rej'iced to see the hoss agin, and you tew, Christopher. You've done well, boy! you've done well. Come in, won't ye, all of ye?"

"Can't stop," grumbled Eli.

"We'd be delighted," said Lydia, hastening to soften his blunt refusal, "but we mutht be driving back home."

"A-drivin'!" echoed Uncle Gray, with a jealous glance at Dandy Jim. "I don't see jest how you're a-gun ter du that."

Then Christopher spoke up. "I promised them — I don't suppose they would have driven over to let you identify the horse if I hadn't promised that they should have him to drive home again."

"You! promised! by what right?" said Uncle Gray.

"I thought it fair," Kit replied. "And it was certainly the easiest way to get the horse. Better than to have to take witnesses over there, or send an officer to seize him."

"Possible ! possible !" mused Uncle Gray.

"He can ride home with uth," said Lydia, "thpend the night, and bring the hoth back here to-morrow."

"That's the plan we spoke of," added Christopher.

"And a very good plan it is," said Aunt Gray. "So now all come into the house. The tea-kittle's a-b'ilin', and I'll have a cup o' tea in a few minutes, and I've got some new bread, baked to-day ; 't wont be much in the way of supper, but with some slices of dried beef, and new honey, and pear-sass, it'll be better'n nothin' 'fore ye start for your long ride back."

At the mention of the honey, Uncle Gray looked as if he hoped the invitation would be refused, and Eli was still glum. But Lydia stepped lightly from the buggy, reaching a hand down to Christopher, and saying :—

"I beg you won't give yourthelf any trouble about thupper, Mith' Gray. If you'll promithe that, we'll thtop. Come, pa !"

The widow thought she could not stay for Aunt Gray's tea. Her anxiety of mind regarding Christopher having been so happily relieved, she felt that she must hasten back to her own little home in the village.

"If you go over, you will have to walk, and you won't gain anything," said Kit. "After supper you can ride with us."

So she consented to remain. And Kit was happy. Dandy was in his stall, Uncle Gray having thought it wise to take full possession of him, by detaching him from Eli's wagon before letting him go back to Southmere. The whole affair had been arranged quite to the boy's satisfaction, and but two or three things remained to trouble him.

There was that unpleasant business connected with the justice's court in Duckford; he could not forget that he had been committed to jail, and released only through the intervention of Elsie's father, who had given bonds for his appearance when wanted.

Then there was the question of his future home. He was not eager to come back and live with Uncle Gray, nor was he at all sure that Uncle Gray would want him again on any terms. Eli's offer did not enchant him, yet it was something which he was afraid he ought not to refuse before consulting his mother.

The last vestiges of Uncle Gray's asthmatic wheeze seemed to have yielded to the stimulus of joyful events; and at the tea-table he was in his

best spirits. He made friends with Eli, and even asked Lydia to take a second dish of honey. He talked cheerfully of the little drama in which Dandy Jim had borne a part, and said that he now regretted only one thing — the escape of Brunlow.

"I'd like to squeeze about seventy dollars out of his soul and gizzard!" muttered Eli through his set jaws.

Kit, of course, had to tell of his Duckford adventure. His mother was frightened at the bare thought of his having been in the hands of a constable; but Uncle Gray was in a mood to be amused.

"The honestest boy in the county!" he declared, turning to the Badgers. "Whatever else I say of him, I'll say that. Taken for a hoss-thief! Wal, wal; f'r instance!"

"We all know he 'th honetht!" lisped Miss Lydia, giving Kit a significant smile, remembering how recently he had been mistaken for a thief of another sort. Kit blushed, and scowled deprecatingly in return, hoping that his last mishap would not be mentioned, at least in his mother's presence.

"What's become of the saddle?" Aunt Gray inquired, her large face glowing with satisfaction over the tea-pot she was liberally tipping.

"I left that and the bridle with the Bentings," Kit replied. "It's my idea to go that way to-morrow with Dandy, and bring them home—I mean," he quickly corrected himself, "bring them *here*."

"Wal!" said Aunt Gray, "what's the difference? Aint this your home, as it has been, and as we expect it'll continue to be in the future?"

Kit did not cherish any very deep resentment against Uncle Gray; still he thought that worthy man had been quite as severe with him as circumstances required, and he was glad to be able to say independently:—

"I don't know, aunt. Maybe I can be more useful somewhere else. I've had a good offer."

"An offer!" Uncle Gray lifted his hooked nose and bristling forelock with a quick, disturbed expression. "What's the meanin' o' that?"

"Pa would like to have him go and live with uth," said Miss Badger, while Mr. Badger was preparing to speak. "We'll pay him well."

"I haven't agreed to it," said Kit, "for I thought I ought to wait and see what mother would say."

"Oh! Christopher!" exclaimed the widow. "You know I couldn't bear to have you go so far away."

"I thought of that," Kit replied. "Yet I knew

you would think it better for me to be earning stated wages, than do as I have been doing here. And since Uncle Gray is dissatisfied with me — as he has good reason to be —”

He hesitated, and Eli Badger struck in:—

“I never seen a boy before ’t I thought I should like so well. I’m wantin’ jes’ such a boy.”

“I haven’t any brother,” added Lydia, giving the widow a persuasive smile. “It would be tho nithe if he could come!”

Evidently the subject had been talked over by her and her father before it was mentioned to Kit on the road. It was not an agreeable one to Uncle Gray. His hair seemed to grow more bristly, his countenance more and more alarmed. Even his “bronichal tubes” appeared again suddenly to be affected. He was beginning to hiss and sizzle.

“What’s all this about?” he frowningly inquired. “Christopher can’t go to nobody else; he’s engaged to me. I ben thinkin’ some time o’ payin’ him somethin’ reg’lar; and I’ve made up my mind to ’low him a hundred dollars this year, ’sides clothin’ and eatin’ him.”

He gave the boy and his mother a heroic look, as if it had cost him a struggle to arrive at so liberal a resolution.

"No, I can't spare Christopher! I'm a-gittin along in years," he added, pathetically; "and my azmy's more terrible 'an ever. 'Twon't be long 'fore I sh'll be slippin' my neck out o' the yoke, while he slips his'n in, and hauls the load for me. He's got one fault, and it's gin us some trouble, but he's graj'ally outgrowin' on't, and he's a-gun to outgrow it altogether. He takes holt smart; and I believe he's in the right place. Thought I might let him go and live with you, did ye?" — staring in amazement at Eli. "Wal, f'r instance!"

The widow's countenance shone with pleasure; while Kit could hardly keep from laughing outright as he left the room to go up stairs and make a change of clothing before riding back to Southmere with the Badgers.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ELSIE'S THIMBLE AND SCISSORS.

THE next morning, Elsie Benting sat sewing and singing in the old farm-house at Maple Park, in Duckford, when the stout serving-woman from the kitchen looked in upon her.

"You don't wish any broken crockery mended, or tin pans soldered, do you? Or would you like to buy any patent solder or cement? A man here has some that he claims will do wonders."

"No," said Elsie, hardly looking up from her sewing. "You know I can't attend to anything of that kind when mother's away."

"So I told him," replied the servant. "But he's very urgent; he won't take 'no' for an answer. He insists on seeing the lady of the house."

"I'm not the lady of the house, tell him!"

As she spoke, Elsie started up indignantly. The persistent peddler had followed the servant, and was already pushing into the room where the young girl was.

"You need not buy anything of me if you do not wish," he said, with polite effrontery. "But give me a broken plate, or a leaky pan, and let me show you in about a minute and a half what my solder and cement will do."

"We don't want anything of the kind," said Elsie, with spirit, wondering at the same time where she had seen that face and heard that voice.

"You can use the solder yourself," her visitor insisted, with brazen blandness. "Any child can use it to mend any sort of tinware; a very great convenience, as every housekeeper knows who has tried it. I am a plumber and tinner myself, and I am aware that I am spoiling my own trade when I offer such an article for sale. But why have leaky basins and dippers, or why employ a mechanic, when you can do your own repairs at a trifling expense?"

"But when I tell you distinctly," said Elsie, rising, with sparkling eyes, "that we don't wish for anything—" Suddenly she stopped, as if interrupted by a bewildering thought.

"Or my patent cement," the fellow rattled on, showing packages which he produced from a bag he carried. "Think how often you fracture a bowl or a vase, and it must go into the waste-barrel for want of a slight outlay—a minute's work and a cent's

worth of this truly magical substance which I offer for sale."

Elsie appeared mollified.

"Excuse me," she said. "Perhaps I will let you try your cement on—let me see—what have we, Dorothy? Sit down, if you please!"

The pedler smilingly seated himself, and glanced quickly about the room, while Elsie followed the servant to the kitchen.

"Anything!" whispered the girl, eagerly; "the dish-cover that had the knob broken off the other day—give him that. And any old plate. Keep him till I come back!"

She darted from the back door, and ran with slippered feet and bare head to the orchard, where the boys were gathering apples. Charley was on a wagon with some baskets under a tree. Lon was in the branches, and Tom up a ladder, when she appeared, breathless with running and excitement, and told them who was in the house.

"Are you sure?" cried Tom. "We don't wish to make another mistake."

"Oh, I know!" exclaimed Elsie. "It's the right one, this time. I never shall forget that face! Come! Come, quickly as you can!"

She hurried back to the house, accompanied by

Charley, while Tom slipped down the ladder and Lon dropped from the boughs.

The retailer of magical substances, adjusting the knob of the dish-cover in the sitting-room where Elsie had left him, was somewhat disconcerted to see her return with Charley, followed immediately by Lon and Tom.

"Hello!" he said, looking up, while he pressed the knob in place.

"Hello!" Lon replied, advancing resolutely toward him. "I think I've seen you before."

"Great Grimes!" said the tinker, with a laugh, "I believe you! How did you get out of that scrape? I've thought of it a hundred times, always regretting that I was obliged to leave you on the roadside, with your wagon and harness minus a horse!"

He spoke with gay volubility; but his hand was unsteady, and the knob slipped from its place.

"No doubt you've found it very funny," said Lon, "but our recollections of you haven't been so pleasant."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the tinker, rising and casting a quick look behind him. "I hope you got your horse!"

"Oh, yes!" said Tom, walking around to the door

on the other side of the room, beyond the visitor, "and the little fellow who took him."

"And now," added Lon, "we've got the big fellow who helped the little fellow who took him."

"Oh, got two of them, have you?" the tinker retorted, with an effort at cheerfulness. "Glad to hear it. I give this up as a bad job, miss," turning to Elsie. "You won't take any of my cement, I suppose. Sorry to have troubled you."

He returned his packages to the bag, which he shut, and started toward the door.

"It *is* a bad job — for you, I'm afraid," said Lon. "You'll find that we can stick to you without cement!"

"Why, gentlemen," said the tinker, feigning astonishment, "what's your business with me?"

"*You* helped that boy off with our horse, and we have good reason to believe you had stolen his horse first. Your name is Brunlow."

"That's my name, if I know myself," Cassius admitted. "But what you are talking about is more than I can comprehend."

"Go with us and you'll find out," said Tom.

"Go where?" inquired Brunlow.

"To a justice of the peace."

"I'll go with you when you have an officer with a

warrant to take me," said Brunlow. "Till then, don't you dare lay hands on me — not one of you! I haven't stolen your horse, nor helped anybody steal it. Now, take my advice — mind your own business and let me alone."

He had a wicked look, evidently meaning to show fight if the boys did not let him pass. Elsie looked on in terror, half regretting what she had done. Meanwhile, conscience was making a coward of Lon.

"I have been thinking, boys," he said, "that if our horse was taken by mistake, nobody stole him, and I don't know what charge we can bring against this fellow."

"And I've been thinking too," said Tom, "that his stealing the other horse isn't our affair. I suppose we shall have to let him go."

"That's where you're wise, gentlemen," remarked Brunlow, grinning with a greenish-yellow face. "Thank you!" he added, with mock politeness, as Lon stepped aside for him. "Sorry I couldn't trade with you to-day, miss! Good day!"

The Bentings were all so sure he was a rogue that Elsie was ready to cry with vexation (thinking, perhaps, of Kit's wrongs), and the boys were highly chagrined at their own unheroic conduct in letting him off so easily.

"If I'd been sure we had a right to take him, I wouldn't have minded his bluster," said Lon.

"Nor I," said Tom. "Our mistake the other day has made me think twice when I go catching horse-thieves."

"See the scamp swaggering along the road! laughing in his sleeve at us, I've no doubt!" exclaimed Charley.

"I wish I was certain we had the least claim on him," said Lon, his courage rising again.

"I'd like no better fun than to tackle him," muttered the ferocious Tom.

"I wouldn't have let him go!" declared Charley.

While they followed him thus courageously with their eyes, but not at all with their feet, Brunlow was indeed laughing in his sleeve, and congratulating himself on his lucky escape.

"I thought 't was all up with me, for a minute," he said to himself. "How under the sun did it happen that I should come to the house of those fellows I saw at Peaceville? Well, they won't see me here again very soon."

He was walking away at a brisk pace, when something caused Elsie to think of her work-basket. She examined it hastily, and cried out:—

"Oh, my thimble! he has taken my best thimble!"



"Brunlow broke into a run." *Page 259.*

Brunlow had in fact practised that light-fingered industry of his once too often. He was well aware of the unfortunate circumstance, when, casting furtive glances behind, he saw two of the brothers come out of the maple grove before the house and start toward him with an excitement of manner which did not seem to him of good augury.

"Hold on!" called Tom, beckoning him back, "if you want to sell some of your solder."

But Brunlow was never in his life less anxious to make sales than at that moment. Instead of waiting for the boys to come up with him, he quickened his walk. At the same time he was seen to take something from his pocket and give it a little fling toward the roadside.

The two boys continued to call and beckon, to attract his attention; while the other and eldest brother made a swift *détour* of the fields to head him off. Discovering this movement when Lon was nearly abreast of him, Brunlow broke into a run.

An interesting race followed, Lon running in the field and Brunlow in the road, while Tom followed at a distance. Cassius was fleet of foot, but he had his bag to bother him, and he soon perceived that in the kind of endurance denominated "wind," he was

no match for the sturdy young farmers. He stopped, and turned defiantly.

"Well! what's the trouble now?" he demanded, as Lon leaped over the roadside wall.

"You've my sister's thimble," said Lon.

"It's a false charge," replied Brunlow. "Don't you touch me!" He snatched something from his pocket, which flew open in his hand, and became a shining dirk.

"False or not," said Lon, "strike one of us with that knife and you will have a worse charge to answer."

Tom, at the same time, came rushing to the spot, and Charley was not far off. The Benting blood was up in all of them,—their courage no longer honeycombed with doubts as to their right to capture a scoundrel.

"If a thimble is all you want, you can search me," said Cassius; "but promise to let me go if you don't find it."

"Don't promise that," Tom cried, breathlessly; "he threw something away when he saw us coming. Did you find it?" he shouted back at Charley, who had remained to search the roadside.

Charley held up something as he ran. **It was not a thimble, but a pair of scissors.**

"So he took her scissors, too!" said Tom.
"Elsie didn't know that."

"You may as well give up, Brunlow!" Lon said.
"Put away your knife, and go with us peaceably, or you'll be knocked down and dragged." With these words, he took a step forward and stood sternly facing the coward.

For coward Cassius was, with all his recklessness and bluster. He dropped his hand to his side, still holding the open knife.

"Shut it, I say!" ordered Lon.

As Brunlow still hesitated, backing off and remonstrating, Lon sprang upon him, seizing his arm before it could be raised to strike.

"Grip him, boys!" cried Lon, and in a moment Brunlow was disarmed and a prisoner.

"Now, what do you want of me, my fine fellows?" he said, assuming an air of innocence. "Why do you accuse me about those scissors that you found back there? I thought it was a thimble that you said you wanted."

"That's just what we do want," said Lon.

"Search me, then!" said Brunlow.

"That, again, is precisely what we propose to do," was the reply.

Cassius emptied his pockets for them, and they

examined the contents of his bag. In it they found, in addition to his cement and solder, a pair of silver forks, a dessertspoon, and three teaspoons, but no thimble.

"You see, my friends," said Brunlow, "you have no hold on me whatever. You don't claim that you've lost a pair of scissors; and I've no thimble. Now, my advice to you is to save yourselves and me trouble by selecting any of these articles you like, accepting them with my compliments, and letting me proceed about my business."

"We don't care to accept stolen property, which I've no doubt this is," said Lon. "Give another look for the thimble, Charley, where you found the scissors. Here, Elsie!"

As the frightened girl advanced to meet her brothers returning with their prisoner, Lon held up something.

"Did you ever see these before?"

"They look like my scissors; they must be!" said Elsie; "though I hadn't missed them."

"Go back and examine your work-basket, and make sure, please," said Lon.

She was gone but a few minutes, when she returned, exclaiming: "They have been taken! That pair must be mine!"

About the same time, Charley, after some further search in the roadside grass, cried, "Eureka!" He had found a thimble, which Elsie immediately identified.

"You see how it is, Mr. Brunlow," said Tom, exultingly.

"I see how it is," replied Cassius, recklessly. "You've caught me! But you needn't hang on to my arm so hard. I'm not going to get away."

"I don't imagine you are!" laughed Lon.

"But you're going to take a sensible view of the situation, — aren't you?" said Brunlow. "You can't gain anything by keeping me; you've recovered your scissors and thimble. Now, if you object to receiving the trifles I have come by in the way of business, take what money I have in my pocket-book, call it an even thing, and say good-by. How's that for a fair proposal?"

"It's a proposal we can no more accept than we can take your miscellaneous plunder!" said Lon. "Bring around the horse and wagon from the orchard, Charley, while Tom and I cultivate the acquaintance of this slippery gentleman."

The wagon was brought, the baskets of apples were taken out, and the seats put in; and in a few

minutes the boys were ready to set off for town with their captive.

“I owe this to you, miss! I shall remember the favor!” said Brunlow, looking back with a malicious glance at Elsie, standing in the door to see them start.

CHAPTER XXX.

KIT COMES FOR THE SADDLE AND BRIDLE.

ELSIE made no reply, but stood gazing after them, under the broad shadows of the autumn-tinted maples, — remembering, perhaps, with what different feelings she had lately watched the departure of her brothers with another prisoner, — when a well dressed and tolerably good-looking boy on horse-back might have been seen approaching from the opposite direction.

She did not notice him until, having watched the wagon out of sight, she turned to re-enter the house. Just then he reined his slowly pacing horse up under the trees. She looked around, but failed to recognize him at first.

“ You don’t remember me,” he said, with a smile.

The same smile with which he had bidden her good-by beneath those very trees ; yet not quite the same. In his best attire, having exchanged his everyday clothes for his Sunday suit, and his white baseball cap for a neat brown felt hat, likewise his mood

of despair for one of hope and gladness, he appeared very much changed to her eyes. And yet she knew that smile.

In a moment she forgot the cause of her recent excitement, in this new and joyful surprise.

"Remember you! of course I do!" She noticed that he was mounted on a dark-colored horse, which he rode with only a blanket and halter. "You have found your horse?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," replied the blushing Christopher; "and I have come for the saddle and bridle."

"What good news!" She could hardly refrain from clapping her hands as she added: "Father and all will be so glad! But they are away. You must stay and see them."

"That will be very agreeable," said Kit, with bashful pleasure, as he slipped from the animal's blanketed back to the ground.

"I hope you have got the right horse this time!" said Elsie, archly. "How much I have thought of that strange mistake you made."

"Well, *I* have thought of it once or twice!" said Christopher, standing, halter and hat in hand, and answering her radiant laugh with a happy yet embarrassed smile. "It got me into scrapes enough! This is our Dandy; I must introduce



“I hope you have got the right horse, this time,” said Elsie.” Page 266.



you to him. Dandy, this is Miss Benting; she was my friend, when I thought I hadn't another in the world."

He spoke gayly, yet with a tender emotion glistening in his honest blue eyes.

"Dandy, I'm delighted to make your acquaintance!" said Elsie, touched by his grateful words, but hiding the quick feeling they called forth, in the gentle act of caressing the horse's nose. Then turning again to Christopher, "Where did you find him?" she inquired.

Kit told how he had traced him to Southmere, and engaged Mr. Badger to drive him over to East Adam, omitting from the narrative some unimportant particulars, such as the mishap of his head coming in contact with Eli's club.

"I rode back to Southmere with him last night," he added, omitting also all mention of Miss Badger, to whom he owed so much; "passed the night there, and started to ride over here as soon as I could conveniently get away this morning. The family were very kind to me, and would have kept me all day if they could."

"But you must spend the day with us!" Elsie declared. "Take your horse to the stable, won't you? I'll show you the way. But, oh!" she ex-

claimed, "I've such a wonderful bit of news for you ! When you've heard it, I'm afraid you will wish to ride on after my brothers, who have gone to the village with — you never can guess whom !"

Indeed, Kit was unable to make any guess at all ; and he could hardly credit his bewildered wits when she told him of the capture of Brunlow.

"Brunlow ! that fellow ! Are you sure ?"

He remembered that it was a world of blunders he had been moving in for the past few days ; and the tidings seemed to him quite too good to be true.

"I am perfectly sure," replied Elsie. "There can't possibly be any mistake about my brothers' having caught a real rogue — your rogue — this time."

"Where's my saddle ?" cried the excited Christopher.

A minute before, he thought only of the happiness that rose enticingly before him, when she suggested his spending the day at Maple Park. But the pleasing picture which filled his mind's eye was dashed rudely into the background by this astonishing piece of news, and he hurriedly threw upon Dandy's back the saddle which she showed him.

"You will come back here to dinner with my

brothers?" she said, as he put foot in stirrup and mounted from the threshold of the barn.

"If you wish it, I shall be pleased to, — that is," he added, laughingly, "if you think they won't object to sitting at the same table with me!"

"Do you remember that?" she said. "They're dreadfully ashamed of it, and they'll be only too glad to have you stay. Good-by — till then."

Waving his hand at her with a bright smile and a joyful promise, he was off.

CHAPTER XXXI.

HOW BRUNLOW KNOCKED DOWN THE PEG.

THE Benting boys had taken their prisoner to the office of the Duckford justice, who was absent, and Charley had gone to hunt him up and find a constable, when Kit rode to the door which he remembered so well.

Three faces, which he also remembered very well indeed, greeted him from within as he dismounted and stood holding Dandy's bridle on the doorstep; Lon's in the foreground, Tom's in the rear, and Brunlow's sallow and cynical visage between.

The Bentings recognized him immediately, even without his white cap; and they likewise knew the horse, which they had once had in their possession for a memorable quarter of an hour, — a very good match, they agreed, for the one Kit had ridden off in his place.

They greeted him joyfully, and if a doubt as to Kit's honesty lingered in their minds, it must have been quickly dispelled when they witnessed the meeting between him and his supposed accomplice.

"Cash Brunlow!" cried Kit, eagerly, "I am glad to see you!"

Brunlow, standing between his sturdy young guards, shrugged and grinned, but said nothing.

"Do you pretend you don't know me? or that you never saw this horse before?" demanded the indignant Christopher.

"I know you very well," Brunlow replied; "and I fancy I've seen that horse. They say I saddled the wrong one for you," and he couldn't help laughing maliciously at the merry recollection.

"You think you can make a joke of it, do you?" said Kit, with sparkling eyes.

"My dear boy, it's a joke already, without any help from me," replied Cassius. "Think of your looking me full in the face, and describing the person who had been seen with your horse, while I took note of the particulars, ready to burst with laughter all the while! It's the richest joke of the season, and I hope you won't try to make anything else of it. A joke's a joke; let it pass, my boy."

Kit regarded the "sallow complexion, dark checked suit, and narrow-brimmed straw hat," of the "young fellow of medium height, not much over twenty," and blushed very red indeed, as he remembered how he had described Brunlow to himself.

while Brunlow, reciting each item of the inventory after him, gravely checked himself off on his fingers.

But Christopher did not believe in jokes of that sort.

"I suppose," he said, "you thought that a joke, too, when you took this horse from my uncle's stable, rode him to Peaceville, and sold him to Eli Badger for seventy dollars! Where is all that money?"

Brunlow shrugged again. "Not much of it has stayed in my pocket," he said, which was true enough, he being one of that numerous class from whom, as the proverb says, their money is soon parted. It was, in fact, the loss of a large part of the price of Dandy which had caused him to take to the road again so soon, and so near the scene of his last exploit.

"You've knocked down the peg with the ball swinging the wrong way, in more senses than one," said Kit, remembering the little game he had seen Cassius practising at the cattle-show, and the high moral tone he assumed with regard to such things being permitted by the managers of a county fair.

"A fellow can't always be in luck," was Brunlow's **reckless response.**

"Luck!" exclaimed Christopher. "I don't believe a rogue can ever be in luck, no matter how well he seems to succeed for a time. Do you remember, Cassius Brunlow, how my father talked to you once about being honest, and minding your obligations? I overheard what he was saying, but I never understood the meaning of it till now."

"I remember something of the kind," replied Brunlow, his sinister look giving place to a more sober expression. "Your father was a good man; he gave me good advice."

"I wish you had followed it!" Kit exclaimed, touched by his frankness.

"I shouldn't be here if I had," Brunlow replied.

Kit remembered his own rough treatment when captured by the youthful Bentings, and noticed with a curious sensation that they had not taken the precaution to tie the real rogue's hands.

"You shouldn't be partial in bestowing your favors," he said, calling their attention to the circumstance.

"Oh, no," said Lon, carelessly. "We were green at the trade when we began with you. There's nothing like getting used to a new line of business."

Judge West presently arrived, having been found

picking pears in his garden ; and Brunlow, arraigned on a charge of purloining Elsie's scissors and thimble, was committed in default of bail, his examination being appointed for the following day.

On that occasion Kit and Eli Badger also appeared as witnesses against him, for appropriating and fraudulently selling Dandy Jim ; and still other complaints were entered by people whose spoons had been found in his bag,—for all which offences he was brought to trial in December and given seven years to think them over, in the place which the state provides for wrong-doers detected in such irregular ways.

The charge against Kit was dropped, of course.

And his one fault ?

If he was not quite cured of that, we can at least say that it has not since caused him any serious mishap or inconvenience. At the same time he will tell you that the experience gained by the famous Dandy Jim adventure has been worth to him infinitely more than it cost.

He not only dined that day with the Bentings when Elsie invited him, but sat often at their table afterward, her brothers nowise objecting, they having become his ardent friends.

He went back to live with Uncle and Aunt Gray ;

but it was on new terms and with new hopes, since his acquaintance with the family at Maple Park had enlarged his ideas of a farmer's life, quickened his aspirations, and filled his mind and heart with visions of a noble life and happy future.

THE END.



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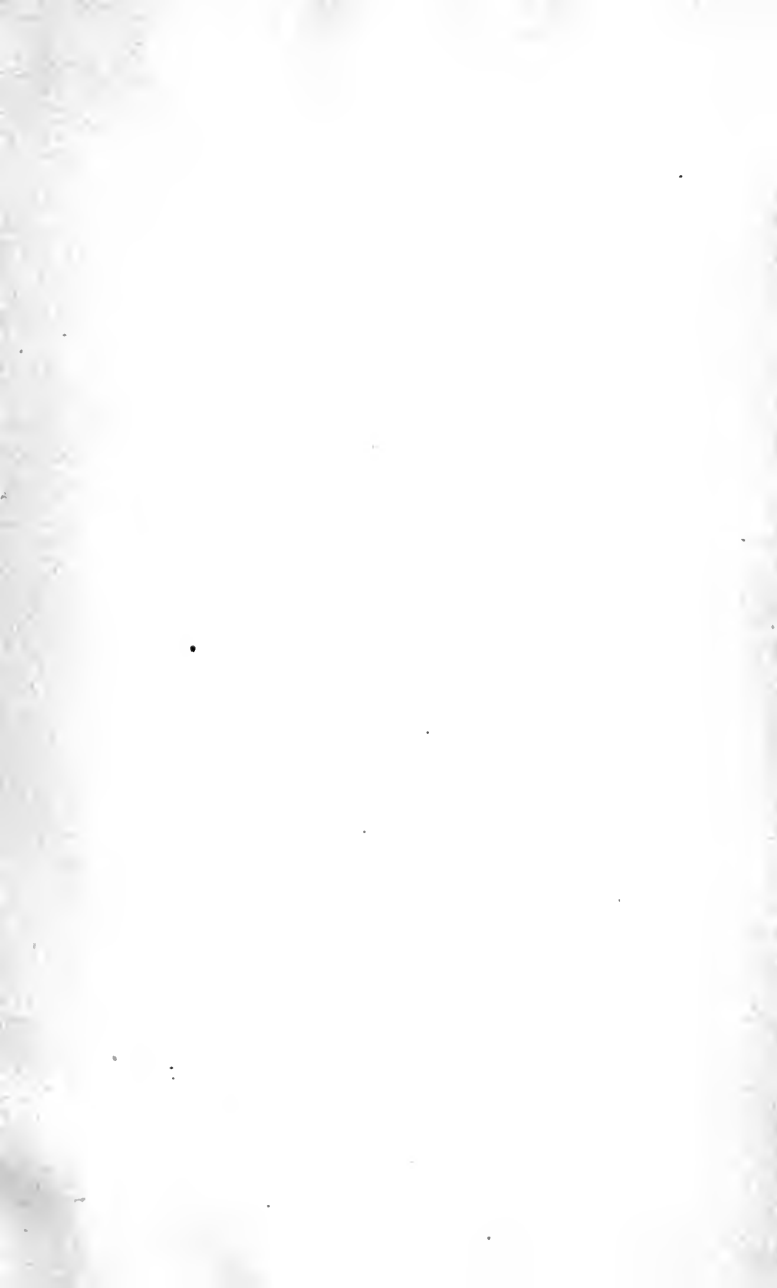
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